망나니
왕자가
LEGEND OF SWORD'S SONG
글럼프
퓨전 판타지
장편소설
되었다
GOLEM
FACTORY

# I BECAME THE FIRST PRINCE

# -Legend of Sword's Song-

– 망나니 1왕자가 되었다 –

## - VOLUME 3 -

**-AUTHOR-**

**Glump**

**[ Active Translations ]**

# CHAPTER 100
# THE ARMY OF YEOKCHEON (1)

Rangers who had been sent out on patrol returned to Winter Castle one by one.

“The atmosphere in the mountains is unusual, m’lord. Even if it is quiet, it is too quiet.”

“Aye. The small beasts do not scurry through the bush, and the big beasts do not leave their dens. The monsters do not show their presence, as if the entire mountain range is terrified by something.”

They gave hurried reports about the strange atmosphere reigning in the Blade’s Edge Mountains.

“To explain it, m’lord – it feels like the quiet eve before the storm.”

Veteran rangers who had survived the war against the Warlord expressed their concern, and it was clear that something inevitable was about to occur.

The problem was that Vincent couldn’t figure out what it was.

“There has never been a thing like this, in all my years, m’lord.”

Even when the orcs had descended in their tens of thousands had the atmosphere of the mountain not been like this. Studying the records of preceding counts, not a single such case existed.

“In this case, it would be wise to ask the first prince what he knows.”

However, the first prince was stuck in his rooms for some reason and showed no signs of leaving. He had just left once, to order the sending of ranger patrols to scout the situation in the mountains and beyond the range itself.

When Vincent had visited the first prince’s quarters with a heavy heart, the elves standing firmly at the door asked that he come back later. They said their Highness

was crossing an important hurdle and was not to be disturbed.

“Why now, of all time?” Vincent had grumbled.

It was a thing to be celebrated if a knight progressed. However, since it was occurring at such an inopportune time, Vincent was more irritated than in any mood to celebrate.

“All the work is done,” Vincent complained to himself. He then spoke to the soldiers with him, telling them to summon the commanders of each unit.

The faces of the gathered commanders were hard. They all seemed to know the unusual atmosphere permeating the mountain was unusual.

These were men who had lived beside the monster-filled mountain range all their lives, so if they did not feel the abnormality in the air, it would be strange indeed. They talked on and on.

“His Highness the First Prince said that…”

“If His Highness thinks…”

The first words of these veteran monster-fighters were all about the first prince.

What is the first prince’s message? Send a messenger to the first prince. What does the first prince plan to do? Did you hear anything about the first prince’s plans? The first prince- the first prince – The First Prince!

Vincent listened to them talk, and it felt as if he was being continually beaten by a cudgel on the head.

His own presence was mostly ignored by these commanders seeking the presence of Prince Adrian.

Vincent’s mind flashed. It shouldn’t be like this!

It was the destiny, the duty of the men of Balahard to guard the north, and not the duty of a prince who had not even deemed it worthy of attending the meeting.

Vincent took a deep breath and made up his mind.

‘Dwak!’ he slammed his hands to the table as if wishing to break it.

“Since when on earth,” he started his rebuke, “do the men of Balahard just stand around, waiting for someone to get the job done for them!?”

The commanders stretched their eyes wide. Shame swiftly surfaced on their faces, for they were stunned and perplexed by the sudden anger of their new count.

“What is the symbol of Balahard?” Vincent demanded.

“Three interlocking shields!” came the cry.

“What do those three layered shields stand for?”

“Courage, wisdom, and duty!”

‘Bwaaa!’ Vincent slammed down on the table once more.

“Do you think anyone of you has a single one of them right now?”

The commanders jumped from their seats and bowed deeply before Count Balahard.

“Sorry!”

“And all you do now is apologize?”

“We know-“

“I know that all you know is how to procrastinate!”

The commanders of Winter Castle re-mounted their seats.

Then, they began to formulate and set in motion countermeasures and considered strategic contingencies.

“If we expand the territory that the rangers rove to the northeast…”

“By strengthening the long-distance patrols by so many men, we can…”

Only then did Vincent’s stone-hard face loose up a little.

* * *

Although they had looked silly for a while, the commanders of Winter Castle were in no way incompetent. The somewhat chaotic and cluttered atmosphere that had reigned in the fortress was quickly brought into order.

On the walls were now double the number of rangers. Ranger commanders led short-range patrols several times a day as they entered and left by the gates. Even the Black Lancers, Quéon included, began to fervently patrol the edges of the mountain range in preparation for some emergency.

It was clear: Winter Castle was on a war footing.

The dwarves greatly admired the hustle and bustle from their vantage point on the wall.

“I am greatly impressed. The soldiers here take to war as a pickaxe does to stone.”

Despite the dwarf having complimented him, Vincent replied with an unpleasant expression.

“If only you had come last winter, old dwarf, you would have seen us move ten times faster than this.”

Most of the soldiers stationed on the walls were recruits, for so many veterans had died in the orcish war. The martial spirit was alive and well, but the true spirit of battle in these men was still too insufficient for them to be called real soldiers.

“Have anyone of the rangers who had crossed the mountain range come back?”

The Ranger Company Commander shook his head at Vincent’s inquiry.

There were twenty squads of ten rangers that had left for the territories beyond the Blade’s Edge Mountains. These men were elite rangers, and most of them were veterans. They were men who had returned from their missions even when the mountain had been swarming with monsters.

Not one of them has yet returned.

That was never a good sign.

“What the hell is out there,” Vincent muttered as his gaze roved beyond the rugged peaks of the Blade’s Edge Mountains.

The mountains and fields were a pure white, and the sky blue, yet somehow, there was a gray cast to the sky.

“If you can only give me a few rangers, I’ll be off at once!” came the distressed request of a young man.

He was Bernardo Eli.

“Suborn them to you?”

“Please, grant me a few guides. I’m going with our kids, my apprentices.”

Bernardo’s sloppy attitude was not one that engendered much faith from Vincent. The man wasn’t trustworthy, Count Balahard mused, like a snake that slithered into its hole, only coming out once the danger has passed.

“Oh well, okay then, even if it is better if you leave the patrols to me,” Vincent said with a laugh, amused at the absurd attitude of Bernardo Eli.

The man conducted his patrols like an old woman shopping for fruit at the market!

Even so, when he first came here, he had been an exiled noble. Since then, Winter Castle had become his home.

“Does your mission have clearance from His Highness the First Prince?” Vincent asked.

“Since when does Prince Adrian manage our patrols?” Bernardo replied with some anxiety.

He wasn’t wrong, so Vincent gave a sympathetic nod.

“Jordan!”

“Jordan is here!” shouted Ranger Jordan from the other side of the wall as he jumped down and jogged to Vincent.

“Your platoon will support Eli and his guys.”

“Okay- Is this supposed to be a long-distance patrol, m’lord?”

Vincent nodded, and Jordan bowed.

“Damned it is, though. Every time I enter the castle gates and settle down for a good rest, I’m sent out on another mission. Going on like this, I’m sure to die in the mountains.”

Vincent laughed as he listened to Jordan’s complaints.

“I’ll grant you a special, month-long leave if you return safely from this mission.”

“I’ll be sure to return then, m’lord!” Jordan exclaimed as his attitude changed in an instant. He sketched a quick salute and ran across the wall as he gathered his troops.

“Lads, we got a mission!”

“A mission? Chief, ain’t it our resting time, now?”

“Don’t the ranger cubs get to go out and run around in the snow, then? Somehow we always get hit with these jobs, innit?”

“Shut up, boys! Hear me, as long we return safely, we’ve got ourselves a month’s vacation in the bag. So shut up, and gear up!”

“I can’t trust you alone with my men,” Vincent said as he looked at Bernardo Eli, who was watching Jordan bicker with his platoon.

* * *

Early next morning, Bernardo Eli and ten apprentice knights left the fortress, accompanied by Jordan and his rangers of the 17th Platoon.

It was now eight days since the first prince had locked himself in his rooms.

Three days later, the rangers and the knights returned from the mountain range.

“Why do they return so early?” mused a coupled of keen-eyed rangers. The patrol

should have taken ten or more days to scout and return.

“Huh!? Hah! It looks like they are being chased!” someone shouted out as he observed Bernardo and his party. The men were running from the mountain range with a terrible urgency.

“Look to their rear!” came a cry.

The rangers along the walls looked to the snowfield behind Bernardo and his party.

Orcs, goblins, kobolds, gnolls, dire wolves – all manner of monsters were pouring in from the mouth of the mountain pass from which the knights and rangers had appeared.

“It’s crazy! There are trolls too!”

Even the trolls, who were the apex predators in the mountain, were among the various monsters, the number of which grew and grew in every instant.

The guards on the wall commanded the sounding of the horns.

‘Bawooo! Bawooo!’ echoed their sound throughout the fortress.

The quiet winter air had suddenly become noisy, and the castle became a buzzing hive of activity.

Rangers grabbed bows and crossbows, staring out across the snowy field.

Bernardo, the knights, and the 17th Ranger Platoon were running for their lives as the swarming mass of monsters bore down on them.

‘Drawooor!’ howled the swift-pawed dire wolves as they stalked ever closer to the humans.

“Faster! Run faster!” rangers shouted their encouragement. However, no matter how fast a human moved its legs, it could never out-pace those four-legged beasts.

“Aah!? No!” the men on the walls cried as a trailing ranger got caught up by a dire wolf.

“Tah! It reached him!”

The wolf leaped and sank its jaws into the man’s face, ripping his jaw clean from his skull.

It was not only dire wolves who pressed the hunt.

The rangers of Winter Castle looked on as scruffy orcs continued the chase, as well as mighty trolls with their beaked faces and necrotic flesh – all chased Bernardo’s party.

“What is this? What’s happening?”

The rangers were utterly confused by what they were seeing. The rangers and apprentices were fleeing before such a variety of monsters!

It was totally unknown for monsters to live in harmony across species-lines. Was there a rarer sight in this world to see?

“Balahard Rangers!” a mana-enhanced voice echoed across the walls.

“Prepare for engagement!”

Count Balahard had raised his sword and pointed out to the snowfield as he voiced his orders.

“As soon as they come in range, prioritize firing at the monsters closest to them!”

The rangers hurriedly readied their bows and crossbows, their faces nervous as they watched the approaching horde.

“Black Lancers! You are to charge at the monsters and save your comrades!”

The knights had already mounted up, and charged through the gate.

“Fire!” Vincent bellowed the instant that the lancers rode out. Arrows were loosed and swarmed through the air into the flesh of monsters.

“I feel so good!” exclaimed the one-eyed cavalry commander, Quéon Lichtheim, as he readied his lance with an excited face.

The Black Lancers veered their mounts to the right and rode on for a time. Then they grabbed onto the reigns and directed their horses to the left as they began to ride over a gentle slope, which brought them directly into the flank of the monstrous horde.

“Ready lances!”

Dozens of mana-imbued lance tips shredded monster flesh as the cavalry wedge crashed into the swarm of monsters.

Quéon frowned. His horsemen were used to fighting monsters, but the ones they now faced were different in some manner.

They should have noticed the sound of hoof-falls on the snow as well as the fact that the cavalry had engaged with them – yet, such things did not get their attention. They just looked ahead and kept on running.

Thinking time came later, Quéon decided, and proceeded to kill monsters left and right. He then saw the fleeing rangers and apprentice knights.

“Save one and immediately turn back!”

“Ha!” came the reply of his men.

He rode on and came up behind Bernardo Eli.

“Fuck it, fuck it! I’m not a runner! What the fuck did I do wrong to have such a day? It’s as if I have honey all over my body, and the badgers were set loose! I go out there, just to give the monsters a fine meal!?”

Bernardo did not cease cursing and complaining, even if he was out of breath from running for his dear life.

“Relax your body, boy!” Quéon crouched down in his saddle, leaned away from his horse, and snatched Bernardo up, slinging him onto the horse’s back in a maneuver that would have made any circus acrobat blush in shame.

“Now calm your mind, boy! We head back and report to His Highness!” came Quéon’s bold words.

“These monsters are not really the problem,” Bernardo cried out as he gasped for air.

“What?” came the gruff knight’s reply.

“The guys way back there, they’re the true problem!” Bernardo said and pointed to the mountain range behind them.

“There are strange… things in there!”

# CHAPTER 101
# THE ARMY OF YEOKCHEON (2)

While trampling over some stumbling goblins with his horse, Quéon turned his gaze to the damned Blade's Edge Mountains.

He didn't notice anything specific.

It was still midday, so the strange, dark shade falling over the mountain looked very suspicious indeed.

"The monsters have been chased here by them!" came Bernardo's cry.

Quéon's eyes then took in the monsters.

A great variety of them was running without faltering. Their usual ferocity was not present – the things were terrified.

"I don't know what those guys are, but if they scared the monsters so much, they must be terrible."

"Who is it?" demanded Quéon as he spurred his horse on.

The Black Lancers broke through the swarming ranks of monsters and gained the castle gates, the monsters still on their tails.

With a great thumping sound, the gates slammed shut behind the riders.

"Huh!?" Quéon demanded as he dismounted and threw Bernardo against a wall.

"What did you see? Whatever went on up there, everything! Go tell the lord, go tell the count!"

At the next moment, Quéon turned to face the group of monsters who had managed to pass through the gate.

He stood and readied his lance as he faced the foe, trolls among them.

Bernardo Eli threw a last glance at the figure of the knight and then ran up the stairs as if flying.

Winter Castle stood ever-proudly above its walls.

“There are terrible guys in the mountains!” Bernardo reported urgently.

“Those terrible folk are watching everything from there.”

Vincent merely lifted his finger in silence and pointed out, over the walls.

There was deep darkness at the mouth of the mountain pass, a great mass that screamed in silence in every shade of evil.

* * *

While the north gate of the castle existed in a state of pandemonium after the monsters had gained it, a group of young men arrived at the south gate. Although they looked a right mess after struggling through a blizzard, their noble birth was not completely obfuscated by their haggard appearance.

“Are you really saying that the tower will be built in this secluded place?”

“I know, right? Firstly, I came here just because my father told me to.”

These were the direct descendants that each noble family has sent up.

‘Baawoooo woooo!’

The sons frowned at the sound of a trumpet ringing out ceaselessly.

“But why is it so noisy all of a sudden?”

“It sounds like they’re training or jousting.”

The sons murmured to each other and decided it wasn’t that important. The soldiers from the south gate beckoned them inside.

“Hey, you! This gate is gonna close soon! If you wanna come in, come in now!”

“What a cheeky soldier, to speak like that to-! Hey! Wait, wait!”

The sons watched as the gate slowly started to grind shut and rushed at it without having the breath to shout.

They reached it just in time.

“You what do you think-”

‘DWAAK!!!’

The young man was startled by the sound of the castle gate slamming shut behind him.

“No matter how secluded it is, don’t they seem quite busy?”

“That’s right! It looks like there was a war here.”

The noble sons continued complaining, dissatisfied with their welcome after such a hard journey.

‘Buwoooooo!’

They now heard a faint sound coming over the cry of the horn.

‘Klang, klank, klang!’

‘Aaargh! Aaah!’

The metallic sound of swinging weapons accompanied the ferocious shouts of men.

“Leave the trolls to the knights! Rangers, organize the retreat!”

The sons heard bellowed orders piercing through the tumult.

They looked at each other, and their faces hardened.

The shock of the one was reflected on the face of the other.

“What is this uproar? What are these guys doing?”

As they stood there, stiff, someone spoke to them. They turned their heads and looked at the speaker.

The man looked almost like a beggar – his head slung low and with a hood covering half his face. All they saw was his sharp nose and his stern mouth.

“Ah! You’re those guys,” said the man.

It was strange, now that the sons looked at him, they noticed the arrogance of the man’s bearing. For them, meeting such a man was a novelty.

“I didn’t recognize you all, expecting to see guys finer looking than you. So when I saw you, I thought ‘What?’”

The man did not identify himself, merely gesturing at the young men and saying, “Let’s go.”

“Uh… where are you taking us?” asked one of the noble sons, who felt tired from the journey.

The hooded man extended a finger, and it pointed squarely in the direction from which the fighting could be heard.

“Follow.”

The sons could not find the words to disobey the order, so they followed the man without knowing why.

“Aaah! Hyaaa!”

“Fire! Fire until you or they die! Fire!”

“Who’s seen my little finger? Anyone seen my little finger?”

The deeper they moved into the castle, the greater the chaos became.

“I can’t even see the blood that’s splashing on my hand now! I’m blind!”

It was obvious: This was the sound of soldiers in battle.

‘Kaanghuuu!’

It was also the sound of soldiers bringing their weapons to bear against things that mouthed bizarre cries, cries which the young men have never heard before. As they kept on walking, a wide courtyard appeared.

“Bleugh, ugh!”

The noble sons covered their mouths as they become nauseous and retched.

Some of the boys didn’t even have hair on their chests, and they were disturbed the most.

The hooded man would normally have clucked his tongue and said it was an ugly sight, but he wasn’t of a mind to do so now.

It was the sight of dozens of corpses and carcasses scattered on the open ground that had horrified these young men.

Monsters of red, yellow, blue, and rust-brown colorations were laying all over, dead or dying, their limbs severed.

“Oh, new blood! Ain’t we crowded enough here already?” a stranger groaned as he watched the sons pass on by.

“Well, I think you can all-“

“Follow,” came the hooded man’s order once more as he interrupted the other man.

Once more, the children were filled with a strange feeling of coercion as they unthinkingly obeyed.

The man ascended a flight of stairs leading up the wall.

“Fire!”

“Ignore that troll! You’re just wasting arrows!”

“Oil here! Bring the oil!”

“Our arrows are not enough!”

The sound of shouts became clearer, with many unknown odors mingling with the stench of oil, permeating the air and churning the young men’s insides.

They pressed their hands to their faces and followed the man up the stairs.

When they finally gained the wall, they choked and retched – the stench of death, of men at war and of ravening monsters swirled upon the wall.

If they breathed in too deeply, it felt like their insides were aflame and sure to be scorched to ash.

“Reform your lines completely!”

A man with a sharp tongue was berating the soldiers around him.

“You there, hold that pot of oil up straight! Do you want to fry your allies as well?”

“Yeah, yeah! Sorry sir!”

“And you! Why are your hands empty? Is this battle over?”

“Sorry… I… Sorry!”

The sons had grown more used to the scorching heat upon the wall, so much so that they regained their thoughts.

They began to wonder as to the identity of the man giving out orders.

Was this the Count of Winter Castle? There could be no other man who could so naturally deal with soldiers – the young men knew that much.

And yet, he wasn’t Count Balahard.

“Huh?” gawped one of the commanding officers as he looked at the noble sons with wide eyes.

“Your Highness?”

There was only one man in Winter Castle that would be called by that title.

It was the man who had summoned them here. A son of the Leonberger dynasty, the First Prince Adrian Leonberger, cousin to the Count of Winter Castle.

Some had said that he still looked like a fat little boy, but the young men knew that he had changed.

He had changed so much, though, that they didn’t even recognize him.

“Where’s Vincent?” the first prince asked.

“Up until now, he was on the eastern wall.”

“Go to him for further orders.”

While the young men were considering how polite they should be, the first prince continued to walk along the wall.

“Highness.”

“Aren’t you a bit late, Highness?”

The officers who saw the prince greeted him casually. Unlike the soldiers who fired their bows with hard faces, Prince Adrian looked very relaxed. Only then did the noble sons realize that the soldiers on the walls were divided into two distinct categories: Those who were tense and those who calmly fought on. All those who were friendly with the prince fell into the latter category.

“My Highness, what is it with the hair that you have grown in just a few days?”

“Surely? I guess I mustn’t have noticed. Do you have anything that I can eat here? I came straight to the wall without a meal.”

The young men’s eyes stretched wide.

In that great reeking atmosphere, with the stench of blood, sweat, and many unidentifiable odors, the sons could barely face the evil that was exploding around

them. Yet, the first prince ravenously ate the loaf of bread that had been handed to him.

And it wasn't just bread – wherever he went, he whined that he was hungry and so obtained food.

Jerky, potatoes, bread – the first prince shoved it all into his mouth, amid the stench of battle and the tumult that reigned all over the place.

The first prince had been walking briskly, but now halted.

"Vincent."

"Your Highness?"

The Count of Winter Castle, a man in the midst of directing the battle, stretched his eyes wide when he saw the first prince.

"When did you leave your room?"

"Just now. Explain the situation to me."

"They just suddenly rushed in! At first, I was worried about the number of monsters, but as you can see, rather than besieging us, they just seem to be cowering beneath the walls, as if fleeing from a greater evil."

So terrible were the grotesque screams coming from down below that the young men did not even think of nearing the edge and looking down.

And even in the presence of such monsters, both Count Balahard and Prince Adrian cried out that it was the perfect opportunity to train their recruits. They seemed completely easy-going and laid-back.

Contrary to the young men's observation, though, they weren't as casual as they looked.

"What's their problem, then?"

"According to Bernardo Eli, the monsters were chased here by something in the mountains."

The first prince stood at the edge of the wall, and his face had become serious.

The noble sons unwittingly followed his gaze, and their faces hardened in turn.

There was an area tainted by black shadows on the border between the pure-white snowfield and the mountains. And there was an even darker darkness than those shadows, attempting to emerge from them.

The moment that the first prince saw that, the monsters beneath the wall became a minor nuisance.

The hundreds, thousands of monsters cried and roared, and the silent menace of the far-away shadows became several times more terrible.

It was a corrupted and sinister presence that none had encountered in this lifetime.

For those lacking the knowledge, they couldn't even guess as to its nature. There was just a mutual instinct that the moment that that thing left the mountain range, something terrible would happen.

I don't want to be in a tower. I don't want to be a wizard. I want to go back.

This shared thought races through the noble sons' minds.

Should I just leave here? No way that anyone knows who we are.

The young men exchanged glances. They were longing for the moment that they could leave that crazy wall.

"But who are these guys?" asked Vincent.

"It seems that they are the scions sent from each family, arrived only today," the first prince stated.

Both the count and prince now stared at the young men.

"You guys sure know how to invite ill fortune, arriving on the same day that this happens."

"That's right!" exclaimed Prince Adrian, and both of them laughed.

The young men heard this laughter and then knelt. They were about to introduce themselves formally.

However, the first prince did not give them this chance.

“While you serve here in Winter Castle, never use the name of your family. You are just recruits, and you will be treated like any other soldier.”

“We came here to become wizards of the tower, Your Highness! At least check if we have the qualities of wizards before making us serve-“

“Checked you out. None of you are capable of becoming wizards.”

They came to this remote place to become sorcerers, so what was this prince telling them now?

They couldn’t understand, and they couldn’t accept it.

So- they protested. They marshaled their courage and raised their objections, faced with the strangely overbearing presence of the first prince.

“I have already confirmed that you are not qualified.”

The prince’s voice carried over with force. If they were not wizards, what qualities did they need, then? It was a statement that sapped the will from their souls. One of them spoke up.

“I do not doubt the wisdom of Your Highness, but I came here to be either a knight with a sword or a wizard with magic. So, I merely ask that we meet the wizard so that he can see what potential we have.”

The young man’s plea made sense in its own way, but his face soon became pallid.

“You possess no qualities as wizards,” a clear voice suddenly interjected. When the young men turned their heads, they saw a woman with a white cape that obscured her face.

* * *

The woman in a pure-white cloak had revealed herself, and all that was seen were

the slim lines of her chin and her delicate lips.

Nonetheless, I quickly recognized her.

The mysterious figure who hid her heavenly beauty under that white cloak resembled someone I had known four-hundred years ago.

“As master of the tower, I tell you now: Your magical talent and potential is inferior to that of goblins.”

Even while pouring out such a scathing rejection, the innocent and pure voice remained unaltered.

“Who the hell are you?”

The noble sons had been captivated by her mysterious aura, but they snapped awake and protested.

They had asked to see the wizard and wanted to prove themselves before him.

I laughed and said, “She is the wizard you are looking for.”

She was the one they had been so eager to meet.

“She is the keeper of the northern spire that will be built.”

I was the master of that tower. The noble sons now turned to me with blank faces.

Even Vincent held the same expression as they.

Why is he doing this again? Vincent seemed to think, but I slapped my sides, and he straightened his face.

“I am what is His Highness said I am. I am the white night mage.”

“I’m Vincent, the Count Balahard and the lord of Winter Castle. Nice to meet you.”

I frowned at the strangely empowered tone of voice that Vincent suddenly had.

His face flushed red, and I had figured that it was due to the heat of battle.

It was not, and I laughed at the vainness of it.

Here was a man who has fallen in love with a centuries-old skeleton.

There was no distinction: It was both pitiful and absurd.

Ophelia had not been interested in men four hundred years ago, and she surely couldn't have changed her mind since becoming a lich.

"Cheer up, Vincent," I goaded him.

"Yeah? Yeah!" came his flustered response, and I shook my head at the fact that he knew nothing.

Still, even on a battlefield filled with screaming and death, love can blossom.

It was a tragedy that the other person was a skeleton of many centuries with not a strip of flesh to her bones.

I glanced at Vincent first before casting a questioning glance at Ophelia.

There must be a reason that she had revealed herself before others earlier than expected. If my guess was right, it was because of the darkness that had come to the foot of the mountains.

"The screams of the dead and the demons were so loud that I couldn't help but come and see."

It was just as I had guessed.

Ophelia, as a lich, was quite dead, even if she was a person. It seemed that the wailing of the dead, not heard by the living, was what led her to the walls.

"What are those things?" I asked her.

I knew that their essence was in contact with death, but I could not grasp the details. The world beyond life was an unknown one that I could not peer into – even with my levels of power and knowledge.

"They are dead, yet not dead. Alive, but not alive. They are the dead who hate the

living," she explained. "It is the army of Yeokcheon."

'And both of us already know what they are,' her thoughts said as they penetrated my brain, and my face hardened.

"They have climbed the mountain with the will of the true dragon in them but could not descend the mountain after that," Ophelia said as she stared at me. "They are the knights and soldiers of the expedition who climbed Mount Seori four hundred years ago."

# CHAPTER 102
# THE ARMY OF YEOKCHEON (3)

The gentle breeze blew through my hair. The corrupted and ominous energy was carried upon that wind, and it made me nervous.

I couldn't believe it. The knights and soldiers in that terrible, dark army were once noble men.

I couldn't accept it. Nevertheless, I had to.

"It is not only the mage who has been cursed by the necromancer."

Ophelia had said this. She herself had been deprived of her rest when she was plunged into the boundary between death and life.

"The mage found a vessel to contain his entire life essence, but they could not find it. So, he became a ghost under the ground that could not reach the living world."

A truth of death that I couldn't see before, and the truths that lay beyond it, crushed my spirit now – four hundred years later.

I closed my eyes out of dizziness, and the cool breeze touched both my cheeks.

When I opened my eyes, I met a gaze of starlight.

Ophelia was staring at me.

Just like when we first met four hundred years ago, hers was a gaze filled with incomprehensible compassion.

"Even if you did speak through the king's mouth, I knew that all his teachings had originated from you. And that you hold them dearly."

A strange, uncomfortable feeling filled me, so I turned my head away.

“Keep one thing in mind. All that is left for those soldiers and knights you so fiercely loved is not the fiery convictions that they held in life, but the cold void of death.”

The cool sensation on my cheeks disappeared.

“When the sun sets, they will be unleashed, together with hatred and envy toward the living,” Ophelia said as she stepped back, still staring straight at me.

“If it cannot be protected, it will be taken. If it is taken, passion, soul, and body will all be lost.”

Her low whisper of a warning struck me.

I studied the sky – the sun was still high, but there wasn’t much time until it completely set.

I turned my gaze to the wall and saw that everyone, including Vincent, was looking at me.

They all seemed nervous.

Their instinctive fear of the soldiers of Yeokcheon, who would come with nightfall, was writ deeply on their young faces.

“Gather firewood and oil,” I ordered, putting strength into the command, and added, “as much as you can possibly collect.”

This would be a very long night.

* * *

The walls had already been insanely chaotic due to the battle against the monsters, and now they became even busier with soldiers carrying firewood and pots of oil.

‘Haawwoooor!’

The case was the same beneath the wall, for the closer that night crept on, the more monsters ran wildly to the castle. Many of these beasts tried their utter best to scale the walls.

‘Kieeek!’ cried a goblin, its nails bloody and broken after the climb, when a ranger’s arrow struck it.

‘Dwaf! Kwadaf!’ came the sound of orcs banging against the gate so hard that their shoulderblades got smashed. The hands of a troll had been worn to the bone as it punched the gate.

Quite the frenzy existed beneath the walls.

Even the veterans of Winter Castle, men who faced swarms of monsters every year, had hard faces when seeing the absolute berserk desperation of the beasts. The recruits fared worse. They were exhausted by constant battle and terrified by the madness of the monsters.

It wasn’t good – If things continued like this, morale would reach rock bottom, even if all the monsters were slain come nightfall.

The undead could not be stopped by an army with low morale.

Those who were terrified would easily give their bodies as vessels, and soon enough, exhausted soldiers would be naught but shambling evil spirits who craved the blood and flesh of their erstwhile allies.

Confusion would consume the entire army, and hell would bloom within the castle walls.

“Vincent, how many knights are battle-ready?”

“Currently, there are sixty-four Winter Knights and fifty-nine Black Lancers awaiting orders.”

Compared to when the war had ended, their power had been shored up quite a bit. However, it was not enough might to beat back the monsters that assailed the walls from below.

“Let the knights gather by the gates.”

“Are you sure you want to open the gates and ride out?” Vincent expressed his concern.

The number of monsters has decreased a lot due to the continual battles during the day, but there were still at least 2,000 monsters under the walls.

And they were not just monsters; they were crazed monsters.

It was not wise to open and exit by the gates in such a situation, but there was no other way.

If we went into the night like this, the tragedy would be of a far greater magnitude.

What the soldiers of Winter Castle needed most now was an overwhelming victory to bolster their hearts and allay their fears.

“Call up some of the men serving under Bernardo Eli as well.”

Vincent bowed, his face stiff, as I gave these orders.

The rangers on the wall looked at me.

Perhaps due to overhearing my recent conversation with Vincent, their gazes shone with a strange light.

Why? Why the hell do you want to leave the safety of the walls? they seemed to ask, and that question was evident upon all their faces.

They figured that they could clear the monsters up by firing from the walls, so they could not understand why I would want to open the gates and so blatantly court danger.

The expressions of the veteran rangers had changed, for their faces had been pale and stiff. They were all now excited and expectant.

“For the north! Come, beat the drum!”

“Hey, someone touched my horn!”

“Imagine, these recruits think that we’re all now dead. If I get to live, I’ll beat some sense into them.”

The veterans continued to joke around, and it sounded as if they were preparing for

a festival.

“I will place my bet on His Highness.”

“Aye, but the Black Lancers are the best on horseback. I’m betting on Captain Lichtheim.”

As the bets increased, some even started a pool on ‘Who beheads the most monsters.’

“I’ll also bet on Captain Lichtheim,” said Vincent in a loud voice, and his statement scratched my pride.

“Now, do we have any more bets? If you have a bet, talk quickly,” Vincent urged the recruits to partake in the betting, but they only looked at him blankly. Then, they bet their coin without knowing who to bet on.

“Sir Lichtheim! Balahard’s financial future rests on you!” came the jocular cry of a veteran.

“It’s not from the men of Balahard that I get my pay, but from the pockets of the Lord Balahard!” the one-eyed commander shouted and then chuckled from where he stood beneath the wall.

There was not a sense of tension to be found anywhere.

The new lancers were swept up in the jolly atmosphere and laughed along without knowing why. Winter Knights and the new Mana Heart Knights joined in the mirth.

I shook my head and headed down from the wall.

“Your Highness,” Adelia said as she found me, bringing me my sword and armor.

As I felt her gentle touch, she observed the knights that had been summoned before the castle gate. Among them was a familiar face.

“Carls is also going?” Adelia asked.

“His Highness dragged me here, so I must,” said the grinning Carls, who had the other ex-palace knights lined up behind him.

“Your Highness, are you uncomfortable?” Adelia asked me.

“Oh no, I’m good.”

“I need to tie your hair.”

Before I could even give her permission, Adelia lifted my hair and tied it in a single deft and skillful motion. When the hair – which had restricted my vision – was removed, I felt a sense of freedom.

“Thanks.”

“I’ll comb it when I come back shortly,” Adelia stated with a satisfied face. She was also fully armed and armored.

Arwen stood beside me, and Bernardo was hovering around as well.

“Why are you here again?” I asked Bernardo.

“Uhh… I have to face the monsters with you, so I have to stand in the vanguard.”

“Don’t even talk about such things. Go to your post. You must lead the candidates.”

Bernardo screwed his mouth at my words and then said, “Sir Arwen, please be safe.”

Arwen didn’t so much as respond to Bernardo’s heartfelt wishes. She merely kept her silence and re-checked her armaments.

“Then everything is ready!” I exclaimed.

“Ready for your latest mad charge, yes,” spoke the one-eyed cavalry commander, and the knights burst into laughter.

As he heard their laughter, he mounted his horse. As Quéon rode to face them, he asked, “So who will it be, who kills the most and wins the bet?”

He smiled and looked across the walls.

Countless soldiers on the wall were staring at us. There were the veterans, full of anticipation, and recruits, some of whose faces were still wracked by doubt.

“Your Highness! Just give the word, and we will open the gate!” came Vincent’s shout.

“Open it!” I answered without hesitation.

The gates began grinding open, their sound terrifying to the end.

‘Kraaark, kruurk.’

The chains and pulleys connected to the gates rattled and squealed.

Gradually, the gates started lifting from the ground.

‘Hawrrooo!’ came a roar as the first monsters started pushing their heads through the cramped gap.

‘Haa fha fha,’ went my breathing as I listened to the noisy roar of the beasts.

‘Mrooaawr!’

“It’s been a while. You seem nervous, said Quéon, and I smiled.

“No way,” I said, “It’s just that my stomach is bloated.”

Quéon chuckled and said, “I saw you eat a whole lot when I was on the wall.”

It had nothing to do with the few loaves of bread I had gobbled down, really. It was due to the Elixir, the essence of the forest, that I experienced digestive problems. I didn’t dare tell this to the cavalry commander.

I would soon find out whether I was ready.

The gate had raised enough to allow a horse passage. The monsters, trolls included, were now charging wildly.

The knights lined up in front of me weren’t even concerned. On my part, I just wanted to desperately stay on my feet and try to achieve something before night fell.

“It’s really bad,” I muttered and slowly pulled out my sword.

Wow… Wow! At that moment, I enjoyed a feeling of wholeness as my mana heart

expanded. Mana spread over my body in an instant.

There was nowhere for it to go, and yet my mana heart kept spewing mana.

“Oooh ahhh,” I sighed as my mana overflowed, as if in flood.

“The place that flees from death.”

I raised my voice.

I had killed the Warlord, but even then, I could not recite it properly with my lowly talent.

“There is no place to die.”

I have gained a higher level and was now about to face the monsters.

‘Vswooo! Vswoo!’ sang Twilight.

‘Pwoo!’ a brilliant beam of light formed up to the tip of my sword.

Unite, unite, and unite again!

The tightly compressed beam of light shaped itself into a sword.

It was the sign of knights who have reached completion.

The destructive power wielded only by those called masters.

I swung Twilight as it blazed.

‘Skaaa!’

A line of energy appeared in the air.

Space was filled by a completed Aura Blade.

‘Keeew!’

The monsters who had been caught in that arcing swing which had sundered the air

looked down upon me.

Before they could even realize what had happened within my body, their heads fell to the ground.

Bright blood bloomed a second later.

“Charge!”

I leaped into that red world.

* * *

‘Gwoo-oh-oh-oh!’

The energy that had suddenly burst from beneath the castle gate slammed into Vincent.

His mana rings began to tremble. So strong was the energy that it made hearts shiver.

“This…”

It was a wave of energy that he was familiar with – and had missed dearly. Vincent stood on the wall like a man possessed as he looked at the area before the gate.

“Charge!”

Roaring like lions, the Black Lancers poured from the gate. At their fore was the first prince.

“Ah…”

As Vincent watched it, warmth crept into his heart.

“Sword Master!” he shouted.

The knights of Balahard had lost many of their number in the war.

Now the knight to succeed them was here – holding a sword that shone with the

light of dawn as if he was banishing the coming night.

# CHAPTER 103
# THE ARMY OF YEOKCHEON (4)

Even when faced with that overwhelming swell of energy, Vincent did not forget what to do.

“Pour the oil!”

The rioting monsters were bunched up as they pushed for the opened gate. The oil spilled over the flocking monsters.

“Light them up!”

The veteran rangers then fired flaming arrows.

‘Fooosh!’

The oil was set ablaze and in an instant, flames erupted to the left and right of the gate. It was not enough – the berserk monsters could not be stopped by the lighted oil.

“Fire!”

The rangers leaned over the wall in haste and fired volleys of arrows to the sides of the gate in unison.

Hundreds of rangers baptized the monsters in a hail of missiles, and the beasts became as beehives with all the wounds that bloomed upon them.

Nevertheless, more monsters swarmed to the gate and the rangers now became desperate to stop them.

“The knights are out! They have left the gates!”

“Focus fire on the gate!”

A sight too horrifying to describe with words now transpired as the monsters tore through the gate as they roared.

Flaming monsters rushed through, bloodied from where arrows had pierced them. The gates slammed shut.

“All knights still in the castle: Kill the monsters who have entered!” Vincent ordered, his gaze still fixed to the area before the walls.

He watched as the knights wheeled their horses around sharply on the distant snowfield and rode toward the western wall.

“Well?” Vincent muttered as he widened his eyes.

He could not see the first prince who was riding on his, his flashing blue blade held before him. All Vincent could see was a riderless white horse that galloped and the Black Lancers who followed it.

Vincent scanned the area for the first prince but caught no sight of him anywhere in the ranks.

“Where is the first prince?” he screamed and then suddenly: ‘Shwaaak!’

A flash from beneath the wall had caught his eye.

He looked down, glaring as if possessed.

“Ah!”

The first prince was there, both his hands grasping onto his shining blue sword, his figure framed by the flames that roared behind him.

Only his personal warriors and the green-cloaked swords-elves were with him.

“Your Highness! Why?”

The first prince did not answer; he just hefted his sword and stepped forward.

A single step.

Yet, it was a step of great portent and lethality.

'Too-du-duk-duk,' the heads of dozens of monsters who were clinging to castle walls with their claws were severed.

The brains of the monsters did not realize what was happening until the moment that their necks slid from their shoulders. A few of them still scratched at the castle walls in their final paroxysms.

A golden flash of light cleaved through the monsters that fell with the prince's next step.

This was just the beginning.

The first prince continued to run along the wall, and deathly golden flashes were followed by green shadows, their cloaks billowing.

A river of blood flowed under the walls.

There were twenty-one warriors, and the only thing they left behind was the ravaged carcasses of monsters.

"Woo ah! Woo ah!" the soldiers atop the walls shouted as they took in the glorious sight.

Their shoulders had become hunched by the presence of ominous beings lurking in the mountain, but they now straightened. Faces that had been bleached by fear now became flushed red as they watched the red procession of dying monsters.

Their fear was no longer evident; no, the soldiers were cheering as they were suffused by the power of a Sword Master for the first time in their lives.

Still, Vincent could not find it in himself to cheer on like the soldiers.

He had at first cheered the first prince, but then he remembered an important fact, and he bit his lip and moaned as he did so.

Vincent recalled it well: When his father had reached this level, he had to spend a great while to work hard and digest his new strength. He had said that any energy not digested would be expelled from the body and lost.

It was a full year since Vincent's father had bestrode the field of battle. The first prince was now using his blade with reckless abandon, not resting at all – and he didn't seem to know that the energy he should have digested over time and made his own would now scatter into the air.

Vincent had to warn him. He ran toward the side of the wall where the first prince was fighting, but then suddenly stopped.

Would Prince Adrian even listen?

Vincent ran a conversation they had shared so recently through his mind.

When he had asked if there was truly a need to open the gates and charge out, the first prince had replied that he had to reverse the grim atmosphere somehow before night fell. The prince had not even dared to say what a battle against the undead would be like.

Vincent now looked at the distant first prince and chewed on his lips restlessly.

The youngest Sword Master the kingdom had ever known was giving up the infinite possibilities offered to him, burning himself out by slaying monsters. And he only did it to give the soldiers a fighting chance once night fell.

It was terrible to think about.

And while the first prince was destroying his potential for the sake of others' future, the lord of Winter Castle was standing safely on the wall and chewing his lips. Vincent wanted to charge out of the gate right away and join the fight, but he knew he couldn't leave the wall.

He was not a knight, but the lord of the fortress.

Only now did Vincent understand why his father would only face the enemy head-on at the last minute if there was no other choice.

He chewed his lips even more fervently. Vincent could not shake off the feelings of self-doubt that welled up in him. Still, he had to do his duty, not as a knight of Balahard, but as lord of Winter Castle.

What the Count of Balahard had to do now was lead his soldiers on the field of battle.

“Rangers! From this moment on, give your all to annihilate the monsters under the wall!”

He had to support the youngest and quite promising Sword Master with every means at this disposal so that the first prince could at least wield his Aura Blade more than once. He had to encourage the rangers to fire their arrows at an increased pace.

“Do not spare anything! Fire!”

Having finished their turn, the Black Lancers and the other knights now began charging into the monsters from the other side, sweeping them away.

Rangers all along the walls kept firing their volleys. Vincent stood tall as he scanned the battlefield with his keen eyes.

He watched both the first prince and his sword, a prince who carried a heavy burden on his shoulders,

Vincent kept on staring with heavy eyes.

* * *

“Huegh!” I vomited, long and drawn out.

It felt as if the bile had barely gone down, but at least I wasn’t as bloated as before.

There was still a lot of the Elixir’s energy that my body had not digested. If I left things like this, it would become a poison that would harden my body and interfere with my mana flow. To a greater extent, the energies could collide with my mana heart and shatter it.

The stiffness in my body will disappear after all the poison has been burned up, so I summoned the energy of the Elixir into my blade and continued to burn it.

Meanwhile, I was killing monsters, discharging the toxins, and boosting the morale of the soldiers.

One stone and three, that was how much energy had been discharged.

By the time the remaining energy of the Elixir in my body was no longer threatening,

I had reached the middle of the eastern wall, along with Adelia and the swords-elves.

“Your Highness!”

I heard the sound of a horse’s hooves behind me, as well as a call from Quéon.

“Stay back!” came his warning, so I hurriedly grabbed Adelia at her waist and flung us away from the wall.

The Black Lancers and the knights passed us by in an instant.

They trampled over the monsters who were scrabbling and scratching and scraping at the walls.

“Your Highness! Are you okay?” Carls cried as he rode to me.

“Are there any injuries!?”

I shook my head to allay Carls’s fears and looked to the top of the wall. Rangers were lined up along it, drawing their bowstrings and releasing their arrows.

There was no sign of the soldiers who had before just followed orders with faces wracked by fear.

They were now hard men, full of fighting spirit.

These soldiers were utterly immersed in the battle.

A subtle feeling entered me as I saw their raised morale.

“Fwoo,” I sighed in relief. Adelia stopped struggling so much in my arms. The murderous atmosphere of the battlefield that made her insane slowly settled down.

At some point, she stopped struggling completely.

“Your Highness,” the bloodied one-eyed cavalry commander called as he approached me. He nodded and lifted his sword high.

“We won!” he shouted.

“We won! The monsters are destroyed!” the knights roared.

The rangers lined upon the wall followed with their own cries of victory.

Still, there was no time to enjoy our triumph – the sun was setting.

“Everyone, return to the castle!”

The gate was opened again. Knights led their wounded fellows through it. I had remained to the very end as I watched the returning knights and finally followed them on through.

“Ignite the fires!”

“Stoke the flames!”

Hundreds of bonfires began to burn.

Still, even a hundred fires can not drive the night away, so it crawled upon us as the sun set.

And at that moment, the dead skulking in the shadows of the mountain were unleashed.

‘Sasa sassak, sasa sassak,’ came the sound as the snowfield, which had been palely shining in the moonlight, quickly turned dark. The faces of the soldiers, earlier flushed with victory, turned dark once more.

I stood in the middle of the wall and raised my sword high.

‘Pvooo!’

Twilight began to shine a brilliant white.

My Aura Blade, consisting now of pure mana instead of the Elixir’s energy, flashed as it lit up the walls.

It would not be enough to drive away the darkness that has already settled upon the world, but through the long night, it would serve as a beacon of hope for the soldiers.

I continued to intensify the light in Twilight.

Soldiers turned their heads as they followed my light. Thousands of eyes were staring at me.

“On this night,” I cried out as I looked at them, “none who are not alive shall cross these walls!”

I was encouraging the soldiers, but also warning the dead who already emitted groans from their jaws beyond the reach of light, in that utter darkness.

“Pour the oil under the wall!”

Upon my command, the rangers hurriedly upended the jars of oil.

‘Fwook!’

Smoldering stumps of wood were thrown upon the oil, and the fire blazed into life, further fueled by monster carcasses.

A curtain of fire appeared along the walls.

I stared at the raging inferno.

I knew that this would not be enough to ward off the long night.

“Gather the soldiers.”

We had arranged this in advance, so Vincent classed the soldiers without a word. All ordinary soldiers, knights excepted, were gathered at the bottom of the walls. Their weapons were taken from them and placed in a storehouse, which was sealed.

“Disable the gate. Loosen the pulleys and remove the chains.”

I made sure that the chains were unwound from the pulleys and stored elsewhere. Furthermore, I chose knights to protect the gate, instead of the normal guards.

“No matter what you see or hear, do not be fooled,” I instructed.

“We will cover our ears and not listen, not even turning our heads,” the knights

answered without hesitation.

Normally, I would have doubted that they would have followed such orders, but not today.

“Stay with each other, but report any weird behavior immediately.”

“If you say that again, it’ll be the tenth time,” said Vincent, but I couldn’t laugh at his words.

“Everyone, stand firm.”

This was going to be a real long night.

* * *

The flames, fueled by monster fat, gradually faded, and after a while, barely lit up the walls.

As the fires faded, darkness swiftly came. I could hear that hissing breath in my ears, and I knew that real night has begun.

“Huhhm… ugh!” sounds of sickness began to sound from all across the walls.

Some rangers gazed beyond the walls at the snowfield, and their eyes became red. Some of them were shedding tears.

“Your Highness, this is…” Vincent had come up and talked to me. His face seemed overwhelmed by concern. And while I looked at him, I was astonished that I could not hear him speak. Furthermore, his face, always rock-solid, was not so now.

“…never be shaken. Well, Your Highness- No!”

Vincent grabbed my shoulder as he grimly pointed with his other hand to an area under the wall.

“Father! Father is here! Over there!”

I could see only black darkness where his finger pointed.

“My father is alive!”

I raised my hand and slammed it into Vincent’s cheek.

“Bale Balahard is dead. Stay upright,” I told him with clenched teeth, and continued, “If you, the lord, falter, then this castle will not last through a single night.”

Vincent’s eyes had been rolling in their sockets, but they now returned to their normal state.

“I’m sorry, Your Highness.”

“Stand firm and guard your mind. Know that the dead do not dwell among us.”

I didn’t blame Vincent for his lapse, and it wasn’t just him.

“Lidoval, you are… Wait! Wait, I’ll save you!”

“Jake! What are you doing? Cubs, hold him!”

Jake’s fellow rangers raged as they caught him just before he could jump from the wall.

Such scenes were occurring across the walls; no, throughout the entire castle.

Under the wall, the recruits had started playing dice and card games, and as a group, they were very confused. The soldiers and knights approached them and bunched them into orderly lines. Some had started to run toward the gate with blank eyes, as if they wished to open them and invite living beings.

The knights guarding the gates beat these runners into submission or unconsciousness.

I studied the darkness beneath the walls. The dead could not invade the homes of the living without their permission, so now they were awaiting the moment at which the living would open the gates for them.

‘Adrian! My nephew, come on, open the gate.’

‘My wounds are deep. If you don’t heal me… ’ #

‘I came back to you, why don’t you open the gate for me?’

The undead were constantly whispering in the voices of those I so longed to see again.

I took a deep breath.

“Isn’t it mine, either those high halls

“Or that dignified throne?

“There is nothing that is not my seat.”

I silently ran [The Poetry of the Defeated King] through my mind. My poem, having reached perfection, spread throughout the entire castle.

The weeping, moaning, and urgent yells subsided.

And finally – there was utter silence.

‘Sssh, sssh,’ a tongue of pure darkness formed – as if staring at me.

“If the king of the dead arrives today, we will take him on, but we will not be taken.”

The Aura Blade was my teeth, and the poem was my roar – I growled fiercely as I stared at the darkness.

Through that long night, I stood tall, constantly reminding the darkness of my presence.

How much time has passed?

In the distance, I heard a cock heralding in the dawn.

‘Kookooru Koo-Krokwaa!’

The darkness drew back its tongue and slowly started to recede. I could see the first rays of dawn come from afar, and then the twilight drove night away until morning had finally come.

“Aaagh,” came the collective groaning of knights and soldiers as they sank to the ground.

“What, you haven’t stepped back?” someone asked me, relieved, but I shook my head.

I knew – the real nightmare has just started.

# CHAPTER 104
# LEFT BEHIND, FORGOTTEN, AND RETURNED (1)

The dead had come to the fortress at night, without fail, and the soldiers of Winter Castle had to suffer as they heard the sound of their lost ones throughout the night.

The first day entailed no more than dealing with the soldiers who had fallen for the lure of the undead.

On the second day, the situation was the same. I stood on the wall every night and fiercely growled at the darkness. The darkness would stop once I started reciting. It would study me and then disappear. I spent the third and the fourth night like that.

When the fifth day dawned, the boundary between night and day had begun to crumble.

Mid-afternoon, with the sun still in the sky, the dead had not yet withdrawn. The sound of their weeping echoed all over the castle. The grief spread by the dead during the night began to affect the soldiers in earnest.

The soldiers were suffering from sorrow and longing for those who they would never see again.

I had to stand on that wall and watch as they wept.

Although they knew that the undead were causing such mental wounds, the feelings of loss had become etched like scars upon the depths of their souls. None could tend to such wounds, so I was left with little choice.

I had to prevent the dead from growing stronger and wilder during the night.

Another day passed.

In the gloomy atmosphere of the castle, even the knights who held accumulated

mana within their bodies began to shake.

“Your Highness, I’d rather open the gates and fight them,” the bold Count Balahard stated.

“Not possible.”

Vincent gave a cruel chuckle at the bad state that the soldiers found themselves in.

“Night and day, these grief-stricken soldiers do not know when it will end or what they can do. It is too harsh to expect them to endure more!”

“It is better than being taken over by ghosts.”

“Your Highness, in a short time, you will lose the strength to hold onto your sword! I’d rather open the gates and find a way for us to go before these-“

“That’s what they want,” I said in a firm voice as I pressed my point.

And it was exactly what these beings wanted. The dead were now waiting for the gates to open themselves. They wanted to take over the bodies of the living, to claim their blood and flesh.

“So you would like to wipe them out before they get in?”

“What weapon do you think I’d use to kill ghosts, to kill beings of unreality?”

If it was possible to cut the things down with swords, I would have done so already. Since ghosts were more like illusions, like a virtual manifestation of the death realm, conventional weapons could do nothing against them – at least as long as they hid in the darkness without taking on corporeal form.

“The soldiers’ patience has reached its limit,” Vincent said in a heavy tone.

I already knew this. Rangers were wandering around the castle, their faces gloomy, and the sound of complaints from all over the place was a sure sign that the soldiers were reaching their limit.

“The soldiers of Balahard are strong. They will not fall.”

All I could tell Vincent was to wait; the time would soon come.

I silently awaited that moment, and it came when the eighth night fell upon us.

'Kyuuuhaaaahaaahuuu,' the ghosts gathering under the walls wailed and whispered each night, and borrowed the voices of departed souls, crying out in those voices in a cruel mockery of life.

'Kyuuaaah aaahhhhhh!'

Thousand of voices, those of deceased spouses and lost parents and children, roared in their collective wailing. Thick clumps of darkness now spread wide over the snowfield, permeating under the ground.

When I saw this, I shouted with all my effort, "All, prepare for battle!"

The knights took up the order fiercely and shouted it along the lines, "Each ranger to his location!"

The rangers, wracked by depression where they stood under the walls, now got up from their seats in amazement as they heard the orders being roared out.

'Buwooo woo wooo wooo!' spread the horn's cry throughout the castle.

"Unseal the warehouse! Bring the weapons to the walls!"

"What are you doing, boys!? Move it, move it!" the knights who were guarding the gates shouted as they kicked the ranger's asses, telling them to get their shit together.

The rangers who had flocked to the castle walls now struggled to take up their usual posts.

"What about your bow!?"

"Oh, I forgot!"

Some of the rangers had not even brought their weapons, standing around with empty hands.

I frowned as I watched this uninteresting skit play out on the wall. They were not acting professionally at all, but I didn't blame them.

They had suffered the siege of the dead for an entire week now. Quite a few soldiers had collapsed or lost their minds. It was great that the rangers could even manage to follow orders, even if they followed them too hurriedly.

"All are ready for battle!" came the report of the knights when the rangers had finally taken up their positions. It was then that the ground began to shake.

Through the pure-white snowfield, there appeared hands of rotten, blueish flesh. Next followed the forearms and the blue-hued heads, hungry blue heads.

Bodies popped up all across the snowfield.

I watched it all with a firm face.

I had known that the dead would never be patient enough to await the opening of Winter Castle's gates by themselves. The appetite of the deceased was not a patient hunger – they could never wait too long to enjoy their dinner. I had expected that, sooner or later, they would come to directly knock on our gates with physical bodies.

Still, there was something that I had not expected. It was that the corpses the dead would use as vessels would be so intact. They had entered the remains of Balahard's soldiers and knights who had died fighting in the harsh winters, generation after generation.

The bodies of those soldiers who could not be buried now awoke after their long, frozen slumber. One could see the signs of the battles they had waged, with a limb missing here or there, but their human shapes remained more or less intact.

And among them rose the corpses of those who had but so recently died upon this field.

"Zane…?"

"My God! It's Gibson!"

The rangers groaned as they started recognizing former comrades. Other veteran rangers kept their eyes peeled as they stared across the snow. Their faces were

ashen pale as they looked to see whether they could recognize anyone dear to them among all those terrible corpses.

I did the same as them. Please don't be here. Please don't… ###

I hoped with all eagerness that my uncle would not be in that mass of abominable flesh.

"He is not there," Vincent said, as if he had noticed my fear.

"My father is not there."

I couldn't laugh nor cry as I heard his words.

I wasn't sure whether Bale should be relieved that his body didn't reappear in such a terrible manner, or whether he should be furious that his death had been so terrible that not a trace of his body remained thereafter. I could not decide whether I should be ashamed of my selfish hope.

I looked at Vincent and saw that his was a face filled with self-doubt.

He was clearly troubled by his own treacherous feelings that sprouted from his current position that he had inherited after his father's death.

However, in the midst of such feelings, I saw that he did not forget his duties as lord of the castle.

"Everyone. Stand fast!" Vincent exclaimed with some ferocity.

"Are they truly the ones you once knew!? No! They are monsters that have taken over those frozen corpses to drink your blood and bite into your flesh!"

Vincent's voice, loudened by his mana rings, rang out across the walls.

"Consider it in full! We are the warriors who have not yet joined our ancestors, and these abominations sully their memory! We will make our stand here today and honor the spirit of those who died for us!"

The moment I heard this, verses of a poem entered my mind. It was the sad memorial song for a father who was killed while fighting to end all fighting. It was

the fleeting song of the extraordinary avenger.

“I piled up green carcasses, raising myself a mountain. Red streams flowed from it, as bloody as nails.”

Even if the corpses we faced were not green.

“I honor your soul before this mountain of mine!”

I held that same desire, of honoring a fallen soul, so no other martial poem suited the occasion better. That verse of the [Poem of Divorce] ended, so I continued with another verse.

“Silent are the snow-capped peaks, the frozen valleys, and the blood-drenched walls.”

The frozen corpses upon the field were a testament to the very history of all the countless wars that had been fought before Winter Castle.

“Only our horns of war are heard, for a new day dawns into which we advance!”

I earnestly hoped that the sound of the trumpet of dawn would drive the night away.

My heart pounded, and mana flowed from me like the ebbing tides. If this had been me a while ago, I would have lost consciousness. But not now – now I was a transcended knight, a Sword Master.

A flame of true spirit lit up on the tip of my sword. And I started to recite [Winter Poetry].

‘Gdsoo-ooh-ooh-ooh!’ a mighty energy spread across the walls.

“Silent are the snow-capped peaks, the frozen valleys, and the blood-drenched walls.

“Only our horns of war are heard, for a new day dawns into which we advance!”

The knights roared fiercely as they followed me in song.

‘Bawoo woo wooo! Trum dum dum trum dum dum dum!’ the rangers, who had been staring in grief out over the snowfield, now blew their horns and beat upon their drums. No one had told them to do so, yet they had heard my promise.

I stared out over the wall.

The frozen corpses were there – now running toward us as their stiffened limbs creaked.

They were no longer an intangible horror, no longer ethereal evil spirits. They were just undead abominations, their bodies frozen.

As I stared at them, I gathered the waves of mana and the noise of my poem into a single point, and I spread it all over the castle walls. I could feel the spirits of the soldiers lifting. The cries of the undead were no longer heard.

All I could hear was the thump, thump, thump, of my heart. I felt hot – as if my body was aflame. If I did not expel this heat right away, my body would be burned to cinders, or so it felt.

“Tonight is the night!” I exclaimed resolutely.

“Tonight, this nightmare ends!” the soldiers took up the shout.

And at that moment, the undead began scaling the walls with their creaking limbs.

I ran to the edge of the wall and watched as the corpses climbed up, their eyes red and their heads lolling.

The flame of my true spirit flowed into my Aura Blade as it formed to the tip of my sword.

This was not destruction, but purification. Blue flames wrapped the undead who had climbed up, and they melted under it.

“Let the dead rest!”

“Banish the evil spirits into the abyss!” Rangers and knights shouted as they drew their swords. Battle was joined between the ascending corpses and the humans on the walls.

The severance had begun – all that had to be burned were the remains of the men of Balahard, who had been asleep for mere months or many centuries, and the evil spirits therein.

I held my sword as I ran along the wall's rim.

I slashed out over and over again, at random. Countless of the undead became ashes in the flames of my purification, which incinerated them just passing them by.

However, there were still so many corpses that had to be burned.

The nights had felt so long – until yesterday, for today felt nothing like before.

I calculated our time-frame, and decided that I couldn't afford to take the chance – I had to end this tonight. When dawn comes, the dead spirits would escape from their frozen corpses and once more become naught but insubstantial demons. And then, the nightmare would repeat itself.

"Vincent!"

"Yes!? Your Highness!"

"What's under the gatehouse?"

Vincent checked and turned back to me.

"There is nothing under its walls!"

After he had confirmed that no undead had managed to pass through the gates, his eyes stretched wide.

"Surely…?" Vincent ran towards me as he realized it. "Oh, no!" he shouted.

Whether he was running to me or not, I still threw myself off the wall.

The undead were crowded there, and those who saw me fall reached out and ground their teeth. Their nails were abnormally long and had grown into sharp talons. These nails now raked the air like a field of jabbing spears.

I pulled back my sword as I plunged down.

'Kreeeheeh!" the undead screamed as their hands were severed at their wrists, and they turned to ash.

‘Chik,’ I landed in the snow, my boots sinking into it. I looked to the top of the wall.

“Highness!”

Green shadows moved past Vincent as he screamed to me.

The shadows drew their swords as they gracefully reached the snow and surrounded me.

“I take over from here,” I stated. I was surrounded by reliable allies, and so had nothing more to worry about. I jumped into the center of the undead.

Slice, slash, slice, and slash again.

They burned and burned, and burned once more.

Any undead caught in the coruscating blue flames fluttered to the snow as ash.

I fell into a trance as I decimated the undead – then I met them: A group of corpses that seemed more rational, clearly distinguished from the undead who blindly rushed at the wall. I stiffened the moment that I saw them.

They were the Black Lancers who had offered their lives like true heroes in the charge against the warlord. But these were just the shells – their true identities were that of the most powerful of the undead who had risen into unlife.

There was a Death Knight, and he wasn’t just a Death Knight either.

I have never heard of a knight like him in the camp of the Dragon Slayer!? ###

He had been killed four hundred years ago when he had climbed the mountain to kill Gwanryong, the great dragon.

“This is good! If you’re such a knight, maybe you know where the king is.”

These were the first Royal Knights of the kingdom.

# CHAPTER 105
# LEFT BEHIND, FORGOTTEN, AND RETURNED (2)

A long time ago, before this land was called the Kingdom of the Lions, I had selected men and women of excellent character and qualities. I gave them special mana hearts as well as the swordsmanship to match those hearts.

Over time they became the swords that protected the king, and when the king set out to kill Gwangryong, all of them went with him. A battle fiercer than any in the kingdom was fought, and countless knights and soldiers died. The Royal Knights suffered the greatest damage, and this was not unexpected.

The king they served was always at the forefront of any battle.

A whopping ninety Royal Knights fell while fighting to protect their king on Mt. Seori, which meant that ninety percent of the hundred knights were slain. The ten surviving knights served as precursors to the current palace knights, while the ninety who had died were consecrated as paladins. The Death Knights before me were these paladins.

Although the truth of their spirits could be felt, the bluish, frozen corpses they inhabited were not theirs. I had recognized their true talent and character, them being out the forms that I had known so long ago.

“Knight of Gwangryong, tell me where the king is,” one of the undead demanded.

The Death Knights did not recognize me, and this was natural.

I had been just a sword at that time, so they still believed that their mana hearts and swords had come from their king. No, even if they had known that it had come from me, they still would not recognize me. Time does not flow along normal lines for the dead.

“If you answer truthfully, I will go back,” a Death Knight said. They seemed to be

replaying a specific span of time that occurred four centuries ago.

“That is the only way in which you can preserve your fortress.”

Perhaps they see me as one of the mercenaries that follow the great dragon, Gwangryong, or something like that. I could not answer them. I did not know how to reply to their empty questions. Still, my answer seems to have been pre-determined nonetheless.

“King’s Knights,” I spoke.

“Speak, Gwangryong’s knight.”

I looked at these corpses, these undead knights, and said, “The war is over.”

Then I told them the truth. I told them a tale unknown to them: I told them what had happened after their deaths. The expedition had won, with Gwangryong defeated.

“The king has finally done it?” one of the Death Knights asked with a cheer. Even if he cheered, his words sounded empty and vain.

“A while, Ekion,” another Death Knight said as he stepped forward. “Do you really believe all this? What if this man is lying? What if the king is anxiously awaiting us?”

“Eus is right! We have only parted from the king for a single day. In that short time, it does not make sense that the war has ended.”

Words full of nostalgia and doubts flowed from their frozen lips. The moment that I heard their names, I could identify them readily. How did I not recognize the souls of these dear brothers, who had so swiftly been selected as the first among the Royal Knights?

“The honest Ekion, the cheerful Eus, and the careful Edar.”

“You know us?” asked Eus.

“Look! Something is suspicious,” stated Edar in a low tone.

“All will become certain once we see the king in person,” Ekion stated, drawing his sword as he approached me. I then told them a truth that only I could tell.

“Four hundred years have passed since the end of the war. You are not only separated from your king – You are unable to follow him.”

“He’s talking nonsense! Ekion, how long will you listen to this bullshit?”

“He is truly an emptied person.”

“We have to catch up with the king. Even at this moment, the king…”

As I listened to the three Ekyon brothers converse, I recalled their final states of being.

Eus, whose flesh was rotted from his bones by the necromancer’s spells.

Edar, whose legs got amputated while he fought a Death Knight.

Ekion, whose body was cursed to slowly freeze until he was frozen solid.

Their final words entered my mind with such clarity: “You go on! I’ll follow soon.”

“Is that what you wish?”

“Wasn’t that what I had just said?”

Did they truly want to follow the king until the moments of their death? One was struggling on, with his flesh rotting, the other crawling forwards with his arms due to a lack of legs, while the third struggled to walk, his body half-frozen.

A warm emotion welled up inside me. These loyal knights followed their king, suffering such miserable deaths in the process.

“You were poisoned by the necromancer. The Death Knight severed your legs, and you were cursed with frost. None of you could follow the king,” I told them of the last time I had seen them, pressing that terrible truth onto their hearts.

“We are dead?”

“Are we truly dead?”

In the end, they had to recognize the fact of their own deaths.

“Us?”

“The dead.”

“You mean…?”

Their tones had been solid and monotonous up to now, but that suddenly changed. Their voices were full of humanity, but now they also turned gloomy, like a breeze flowing through a dark valley at night.

“Ooh… Ugh?”

Their completely red eyes now stared down at the snow – and their own bodies.

“Ooh! Ah… Aaaaah! Aaaaah!”

The three brothers, now Death Knights, let loose terrible screams and drew their swords. The dark-black energy coalesced around them and tangled into their swords.

The half-elven swordsmen surrounded me.

“Get back!” I ordered them.

“Ninety dead knights. It’s impossible… we are alone?” one of the brothers lamented. I saw someone beckon to me, so I looked back at Winter Castle for a while. The rangers on the walls had their faces distorted like demons as they drove spears through the corpses of old comrades.

Some knights had amputated limbs, and they stared with vague and blank faces as the bodies of their old fellows tumbled from the walls.

“This is my fight,” I stated.

This is the holy funeral of old comrades, long put off. There was no choice. I will remember all the fallen, along with the soldiers of winter.

Faces stared at me, and I softly said to an unknown half-elf, “Go on.”

“Please be careful,” Adelia said, and after giving me a short wave of her hand, she and

the swords-elves disappeared. A dark energy surrounded me when my companions left. It was corrupted and sinister, and so cold. Yet inside, I could feel that it was sorrowful.

I held my sword out in front of my chest, and I looked at the King's Knights.

"Honor to the knights of the king!" I exclaimed and sparked a flame at the tip of my sword.

I recited the poetry within my mind. It was a tribute to the ninety knights who had fought and fell for their king. I stepped into the middle of that unclean and ominous energy and channeled mana into Twilight.

Dozens of black blades met my brilliantly shining Aura Blade.

'Zbang!'

I felt a terrible shock as the corrupted spirit energy penetrated my body. I drove it away by deft blocks and vigorous turns of my mana. Then I slashed out with my sword again. The black blades flew in for another sortie.

Dodge, block, and slash.

Fragments of pure darkness scattered in all directions. Black flames became black ashes.

Dark fire became smoke as I shattered the darkness, fighting like crazy.

And how maddening was the battle not!

Suddenly – The world turned white.

The light was too brilliant to be named dawn's twilight and far too sudden to be called morning.

"Oooh, ugh," the Death Knights groaned as they stepped back. As I caught my breath, I threw a glance toward Winter Castle. The fighting had ceased in the fortress. A woman stood on the tallest tower, her pure-white robe fluttering in the wind.

She was Ophelia, the white night mage.

“I know that you have no intention of participating this time,” I said, knowing that she would hear me. This was because her essence was the same as this darkness, the same as the undead. Words of darkness can not extinguish a greater darkness, and eternal redemption or complete cessation of undeath cannot be brought about by its like kind.

“The wailing of the dead and the cries of the living,” Ophelia’s answer slid into my mind. It wasn’t an easy thing to hear, but I knew she wanted me to save them. I fixed my sword before me as I saw the knights and candidate knights storm out of the gates as they defeated the last of the undead.

“Where is this?”

“Why are we…?”

The chaotic thoughts of the Death Knights poured from their minds countless times.

“Who are you? Where is the king?”

Once more, they asked me where the king was, as they had when we first met. They seemed to have completely forgotten everything that had just happened. Still, not everything was the same.

“What are you talking about, Ekion? The king is in front of you.”

“What are you saying, Edar? There is the king.”

“You mean you can’t sense the king’s energy?”

The three brothers started to grumble over the fact of my existence.

“What I feel from him is definitely the energy of the king.”

“But it’s different.”

“It’s not entirely different.”

“It’s not exactly the same.”

Other Death Knights also emitted such confused notions.

“Are you our king?” Ekion asked me amid all those frantic thoughts.

“I am not your king,” I stated, and this made the Death Knights murmur.

“All be quiet,” Ekion told the other death knights as he raised his hand and calmed them.

“But this energy we feel is definitely his,” he stated, then asked me, “It has to be. Don’t you have the same mana heart?”

Both the king they had served and I had the will of a true dragon within our hearts.

“Who are you then, to have the king’s soul?”

I laughed – it was all too formal for my tastes.

Ekion’s question was the exact same one I had asked myself countless times while breaking down the wall that separated me from the Sword Master level.

Probably, if I were the man I had been some time ago, I would have already stumbled and failed.

At that time, I could not be called a sword or a human being.

“I am…”

But not anymore.

“…Adrian Leonberger.”

They figured me to be the majestic Gruhorn, who had existed hundreds of years ago.

“I am a prince of the country that your king has established.”

I was the human Adrian Leonberger.

What wicked turns fate can have in store for us.

The first beings I openly identified myself to as Prince Adrian were not the living, but these Death Knights.

“What does that mean?”

As I watched the ninety Death Knights stare at me with vacant faces, I said energetically, “The war is over. Gwangryong was slain, King’s Knights.”

Again, they couldn’t believe me. I drew the sword I had sheathed and then recited a verse of the poem. I recited the holy triumph of their king, a song about his brilliant achievement.

“I cut scales from a dragon, a dragon that no sword could cut, and I drank its steaming blood!”

It was [The Poem of the Dragon Slayer].

Upon reaching the level of master, my mana vessel had become incomparable to the previous one.

This vessel now screeched, as if it would break, and the mana contained in that big bowl quickly emptied.

‘Lrool lrol lrool!’ cried Twilight at that moment, a bizarre sound indeed. It was the roar of a wild beast that had bitten into a dragon’s neck. It was the resonance of my soul and sword, in harmony, both having reached master level.

It was not enough to sing a full [Mythic] poem. Still, it would be enough to prove Gruhorn’s achievement in killing the dragon. I didn’t even need to recite an entire poem; one passage from the second half was enough. The Royal Knights were also part of the poem.

“Aah! Aaaah, ah, ah!” the Death Knights groaned – for a long time.

Their collective thoughts rose like a tsunami and washed into me: The joy of the honest Ekion, the despair of the cheerful Eus, and the emptiness of the prudent Edar.

The indescribable emotions of those ninety knights penetrated my soul. I endured their stormy thoughts with my teeth clenched and waited for their joy, emptiness, and despair to subside.

“Aaah?”

Their thoughts, having thrashed wildly forward, now faded little by little. Only one emotion remained, then.

“The king has finally succeeded!”

And lo: All that was left was their sense of relief.

The three Ekyon brothers looked to me and asked, “Then we are dead?”

“Yours was an honorable death,” came my reply.

“Did the king think so?”

“All ninety Royal Knights who died on Mount Seori were consecrated as paladins.”

When I asked if that was not enough for them, Eus burst into laughter.

“If we were named as Paladins, we might just as well have been born peasants and died in peace.”

“It was a very good life.”

“If there is a regret, it is that I did not get the chance to once more hold a woman’s hand before I died.”

For the first time in my life, I could only laugh as I felt their bitterness.

“Descendant of the king, why don’t you tell us a little more?” one asked.

“I’m so curious about the transformation of the kingdom,” added another.

“What about the empire?”

I looked around for a while as I considered the questions of the Death Knights. Dawn was approaching from afar.

The Death Knights also noticed the lifting of the darkness as a new day dawned, but they sat down on the snow as if ignoring it, and then stared at me.

I sincerely answered their questions.

In turn, they all listened to my story. When my tale of the fallen kingdom was at last over, we all stared at each other.

The thoughts of the dead, which I could never know, came and went. As I stood watching the Death Knights, knights from Winter Castle came running to me.

“Your Highness!? Highness!”

“Your Highness!”

It was Arwen, Adelia, and the ex-palace knights, and they urgently called as they came running.

“What are these doing here?” Bernardo Eli growled menacingly at the Death Knights as he pulled out his sword. Behind the first group, I saw Gwain and the other knight candidates, who looked a right mess after the night-long battle.

“They are not the enemy. Sheathe your sword.”

At my words, Bernardo clucked his tongue as he looked at the Death Knights and said, “So, you were playing games with the dead all night long?”

“Stop talking! Bernardo Eli!” Arwen shouted.

“No? Someone had to be fighting for something,” came his glib response.

Arwen looked at Bernardo and then said with a snarl, “Watch that mouth.”

And with that short order, Bernardo shut his mouth.

“Tchu,” I clucked as I viewed the pathetic spectacle. The Death Knights had been sharing their thoughts, and one of them looked at me and said, “We will not leave.”

“What?”

“There is still work to be done,” came the deadpan response of one, which added, “We will only be able to rest after we finish that work.”

At these sudden words, Bernardo and other knights instantly drew their swords.

“Look! I knew they would do this!” Bernardo cried.

I ignored him and told the death knights, “The war is won. Your mission is over.”

They shook their heads – they had more to do.

“The war is not over yet.”

I frowned at their words. I wished that I could hold them here and ask what they were talking about. But I couldn’t. Morning would soon be here, and there would be no time left for the dead.

“See you again, descendant of the king.”

As they spoke those words, their corpses fell to the snow, and their heads split open.

Ghosts flowed from the corpses and passed me by. I turned my head and saw that the spirits were heading to Gwain and the other candidate knights. These were the men with the same Royal Knight mana hearts and swords that the Death Knights had held during their lives.

“Well?” Gwain asked as he tilted his head, noticing that I stared at him.

It seemed that the knights could not see the ghosts; the undead spirits were invisible to them.

But I saw it. I watched as the ghosts – the three Ekyon brothers included – flowed into the bodies of those knights.

“When the time comes, we will meet again.”

Ekion’s promise penetrated my mind.

“I see you again, Prince!”

As I heard Eus’s cheerful words, spoken from Gwain’s lips, I was struck completely and utterly dumb.

# CHAPTER 106
# LEFT BEHIND, FORGOTTEN, AND RETURNED (3)

Dawn broke.

The darkness that had assailed Winter Castle throughout the night disappeared. However, evidence of its existence remained. Corpses were scattered everywhere.

The soldiers of Winter Castle were gathering up all the bodies, as well as any severed limbs. All these remains were piled up high on the field before that castle gate.

And then, the pile was lit.

The bodies of those who had not known proper burial for centuries were now burned, and an acrid smoke rose from the blazing pile of corpses. No one spoke; rangers and knights alike watched in silence. I also stood with them on the wall as we watched the bodies burning. I watched as four hundred years of history became an ash and was scattered upon the wind.

The fire did not die out until the sun had set.

* * *

“There are quite a few injured, but none have died.”

The knights who had charged out with me had all miraculously survived the battle. Perhaps it was due to the weak connection between the undead and the frozen corpses they had inhabited.

Thanks to that, many soldiers had teeth-marks and nail-scratches, but not one of them had died.

“I have thoroughly debriefed the soldiers,” Vincent stated.

“Don’t worry.”

Vincent did not leave after giving his reply, and I noticed that he still had something to say.

“What?” I asked.

Vincent hesitated for a while and then said, “It’s a bit late, but congratulations.”

“For what?”

“Are you not the youngest Sword Master of the kingdom?” Vincent asked with a smile.

His congratulations may have been belated, but that did not mean I was in a situation where the leisurely giving and receiving of praise had any worth. I smiled and said that I had to get some rest, but Vincent seemed to have more words weighing on his heart.

“I am also sorry,” came his sudden apology. “Balahard will never forget Your Highness’s sacrifices.”

His face was filled with regret. I could not understand his apology at all.

“I will become stronger. The Winter Knights, too. Your Highness will never again have to carry the burden alone.”

When I tried to ask him why he was saying such things, he just kept his silence. His expression was tight, but it revealed his absolute commitment. Whatever his reasons, I was not about to ruin his convictions. So I just told him that I would be looking forward to it.

Vincent left, and the High Lich visited me. I told her about what transpired with the Death Knights.

“There seems to be a mission that they had not yet achieved,” Ophelia said.

“All the obligations placed upon them four hundred years ago have been completed. There is nothing left for them to do.”

“Don’t be impatient. You’ll know what it is when the time comes – when they tell you of it.”

I became convinced by her words, though I didn’t want to be.

Even if they were dead men, the knights still had upright and noble hearts and would not do anything to harm the kingdom.

My main concern was Gwain and the other knight candidates. I had watched as the disappearing ghosts had seeped into their bodies. Ophelia spoke up again.

“Don’t worry. They did not hurt them much, and they were not forced out of the bodies. They just needed a place to sleep for a while.”

I had to admit, Gwain and the candidates had pretty good bodies for the Death Knights to rest in.

They all had the same mana hearts and the same blind loyalty to the kingdom.

The wavelengths of their souls and their bodies’ energy were on the same level.

“Right,” I said as I glanced at Ophelia and then poured myself a drink. I did not like alcohol, but I figured I had to drink a little today.

I emptied the cup in memory of the soldiers and knights who had fallen four centuries ago upon Mount Seori. I emptied another cup in memory of the spirits of Balahard, who had never had a true funeral.

“For the loyal knights.”

Even if it would kill me, I offered and downed another cup to the knights who had been loyal to the king till the very end.

* * *

Three days passed after the battle with the undead.

“There are ugly rumors going around the castle.”

“Some say they see ghosts or moving shadows hidden in the dark.”

It seemed that the wounds of the dead weren't only skin-deep. I heard childish rumors spread among tough men, who had not even retreated from the terrible monsters. These soldiers seemed to get scared by mere ghost-stories.

"It is not strange for them to see things in every corner. They did hear ghosts cry to them, and they did see the dead come back to life. But this will all be forgotten over time."

I knew that such vain ghost-tales would disappear from one mind to the next as time passed. Well, I had thought so, at least. As the sun set the next day, I explored the castle, and I found them.

As was usual, Ophelia had thrown me out of my room because she viewed me as a distraction. I had felt quite depressed since a few days ago, so on this day, I aimlessly wandered about the castle.

It was a peaceful night, and the time was such that none were awake except the guards upon the walls. I heard noises coming from one corner of the fortress.

There was a rustling sound and then: 'Wachak, Wagjak!' 'Klangelangelang!'

I sought the source of that annoying sound and finally found myself before the kitchen.

"Well?" someone asked, and I looked into familiar faces.

It was Gwain and the other knight candidates. I figured that they were hungry after practicing all day, so I made to turn around, but Gwain and the others saw me and bowed their heads.

"Let's finish eating it all," he then said. I shook my head and once more turned away, but then my face hardened, and I turned back.

The three men who were ravenously devouring the kitchen's stocks stopped eating and stared at me.

"Would you like to eat with us?" Gwain asked as our eyes met, and he then squeezed a lump of meat, dripping with blood, into his mouth.

His was a common enough greeting, and on the face of it, there was nothing special

about it. If they weren't all former secret knights of the royal family who wanted to kill me, that was.

These were all men who held daggers dripping with hatred and resentment to my back. Since our visit to the capital, they haven't been so openly hostile to me as before. But that in no way meant that our relationship has improved to the point where they would bow their heads to me out of respect.

These guys had bowed their heads, even if their greeting had not been formal or cultured.

It was strange. In fact, it was an utterly incomprehensible behavior.

So I asked them, "Who are you?"

Gwain responded quite naturally to my question.

"How can you not recognize your loyal subordinates?"

I gave a bloody laugh. Any dog that happened to pass by at that moment would also laugh were he to hear Gwain claim that he was under my command.

"Don't bullshit me."

Gwain and the other men exchanged glances upon hearing my words. And then, a strange wave of energy suffused my senses. It was the transmission of will, a wave of thought, something which cannot be grasped by human senses.

I now thought that I knew who they were.

"Reveal yourself."

"What on earth are you talking about?"

Gwain's tone and expression were very familiar to me.

"Eus?"

Upon my question, Gwain – or Eus, the Death Knight puppeteering Gwain – grew stiff. He looked at me as he shut his mouth and turned his head to his companions.

With him was a man with slitted eyes and a man who looked at me with an awkward face.

“Ekion and Edar. I told you not to do this.”

As I spoke, their distinctive thought waves began to flow in a frenzy. I listened in on their telepathic exchange.

‘What is he talking about? Did I say that the meat is good?’

‘It’s frustrating – it’s frustrating.’

The ghost-stories were real enough. I continued to feel their thoughts flow through my mind.

‘Should we jump?’

‘I think it would be better to just pretend that we don’t know until the end.’

‘Or maybe we can beat him, and then run away?’

‘I’ve already considered everything, and your plan means nothing. It is impossible to subdue him – consider his actions and high level that we saw that night.’

‘There is no sword at his hip. And here, we have a knife.’

‘A knife for meat, yes, but it is no sword.’

Their absurd musings flowed through my mind as if it had entered through my ears. I finally cried out, making it clear that if they tried something, they would lose by it.

“Whoever tries to beat me will get thrashed in turn.”

‘Has he heard us?’

‘I think he’s heard us.’

‘You’re correct, so shut up!’

The thoughts exchanged by the three Ekyon brothers suddenly ceased. As I saw all

three men look at me with awkward faces, I brought my hand to my forehead.

Now I remember.

The three Ekyon brothers had reached levels beyond extraordinary. They had been among the best Royal Knights, as well as being the most promising where prospective talent was concerned. They had been the youngest Royal Knights, ever.

When the three brothers had died on Mount Seori, Ekion was twenty, Eus was nineteen, and Eidar was eighteen.

Apart from their skill, they were surely of an age to cause trouble.

“Okay. I know you were all quite bold back then,” I said as I recalled the past.

Gwain rolled his eyeballs.

“Eus, it is obvious that you were inciting your brothers,” I continued.

In the past, the main fire-stoker had been Eus, the ever-cheerful second son.

“No,” was all that Eus said.

I kept to my own thoughts as I heard him speak. These were loyal knights, but they acted like feral dogs with fleshy bones.

I wrapped my head around the possible accidents that could flow from these youths’ brazen poltergeisting.

* * *

“It is unfair. It’s because I can’t sleep quietly these days,” Gwain, that is Eus wearing Gwain’s body, made his excuse. He said that he could not stand his lack of a body. He wanted to enjoy things that could only be enjoyed by those with corporeal forms.

“Is that all you want to do? Eat?” I asked.

“For some reason, I can’t resist my appetite. Even if you think it’s funny, it’s a serious problem for us.”

Contrary to Eus's words, I did not consider their desires to be ridiculous at all. I understood it all. When I had gained my human body, the first thing I enjoyed was food. At that time, I thought it was enough to be able to eat as a human, so great was the pleasure.

Although they could not fully remember it, having been undead for so long, their appetites were still hale and hearty, as mine had been when I awoke in Adrian.

It wasn't that they were completely claiming these bodies, nor were they extorting the lives of others.

I wasn't even that they were filling someone's stomach by stealing their body.

It was just a brief stroll into the night while the body's owner was unconscious.

"You must avoid harm to the owner of the body. You must have self-control," I told them.

"I bet I haven't done anything that hurts this body."

"Yes. I feel rather proud, because our energy would weaken if we did not do this."

"But do you truly understand?" I demanded.

There was nothing to understand. How could I blame them if I was walking around in another's body? Even if they didn't understand, would they be careful, as I had demanded?

I shook my head. No way.

So, I offered the troublemakers and appropriate compromise.

"An hour each day. However, no one must know."

I laughed as they so eagerly nodded.

"By the way, I respect you all," I stated.

"For now, I have an identity," came Eus's quick reply.

“That’s good, but behave, and be quiet.”

At my words, Eus, the current Gwain, said in a subtle tone, “And if our existence benefits them as well, no one is hurt.”

‘There is unusable mana scattered throughout my new friend’s body. It is the first time that I see such a thing, with the fragments distributed all over the body. It should be quite painful for this body to channel mana.’

‘It may not be possible in a short time, but if you work hard at it for a long time, you will not feel pain every time that you leave. And if you’re lucky, you can finally absorb all that energy.’

‘Wouldn’t that be enough of a reward for using their bodies?’

The mindless thoughts of the three brothers made me consider things seriously. I figured that I knew what mana fragments they were talking about. It was evidently the remains of the mana rings that had been shattered due to the original owner of my own body.

In other words, the energy of the mana rings had exploded into the bodies of Gwain and the candidates. I looked at the three Ekyon brothers.

‘But it is a big mistake to use the flesh of the living against their will. I will be self-respecting and-‘

“No,” I said as I cut off Ekion and his guilty telepathic musings. “It has nothing to do with being self-respecting. You just have to cross that line. Do what you have to do,” I said as I watched the three Ekyon brothers, and then added, “and it would be better if you passed into others as well and absorbed the fragments of mana spread in their bodies.”

It seemed that the ruined knights, the betrayed knights, could be healed in order to reach their previous level faster than I had ever thought.

Laughter flowed from my lungs.

It was not my mistake, my betrayal, but it had become the karma that I had to bear in the end. And here was a way to somewhat balance that karma. Still, it might not make the knights smile, and I would never be able to compensate them for the time

that they had spent as broken men.

“Are you really closing your eyes?” Eus asked me with some curiosity.

“I’ll pretend I don’t know from now on,” I told myself.

It was not my body that had sinned, so the karma wasn’t truly harming me.

There existed no reason to miss such a golden opportunity.

* * *

Three more days passed after I met with the Ekyon brothers, who now roamed every night.

After finishing my preparations for leaving the castle, I headed to the capital with only a few knights in my retinue.

The war of winter was won, and I had passed the king’s test. All that remained was to finish the business that I had started, and for so long put off.

My horse ran on without pause. We finally arrived at the capital, and I immediately went to the king.

“I came to receive the prize you had promised me.”

# CHAPTER 107
# WHO DARES TO DISCUSS QUALIFICATIONS? (1)

The king did not answer for a while. He just looked through me and then suddenly raised his hand.

'Swish,' came his nervous gesture, and the palace knights and attendants nodded, bowed their heads, and stepped from the room.

The door closed behind them. The only people left were the king and I.

The king was silent, and I remained standing still.

All I wanted to receive was the sword hidden under the palace, but the king knew he would be giving me more than a sword. The sword itself symbolized the throne, as it was the sword the founding king had used to kill Gwangryong, the great dragon. Giving me Dragon Slayer meant that he would be proclaiming that I would be the next king. His mouth could not so easily come to terms with this truth. When I was far from the throne, he didn't want to give me anything. Now, I was an ugly truth that he wanted to get rid of right away.

The king had bitten off more than he could chew; he had promised me too much.

But he could not change his mind.

The words of the monarch are like heavenly gold, immutable and pure. What's more, his words become even more set in stone if he made a promise for the throne.

Even if I had forced him to bite into my lure, who would believe and follow the king, were he to break his word to his eldest son? If he did that, it would be as if the monarch chucked his own authority in the gutter.

"I…" the king said, and then stopped speaking for a goodly while.

"I hate you," he confessed.

“I know,” came my casual response.

“I really hate you.”

“I know that very well.”

The king’s tone changed: He had pretended to be embarrassed, now his voice grew a little harder.

“I really hate you, for you walk around as if you are okay with your past brutality and betrayal. You, a traitor, swagger about my palace as if you attended a fair or a ball.”

Even such blatant hate-filled words did not shake me.

From the moment I had first met him, the king’s eyes had been the same. Not even for a moment had he considered me in a favorable light. His blue eyes had always contained contempt and hatred.

That was nothing new to me.

“But,” said the king with a distorted face, “as monarch, I have every intention of taking responsibility for an oath that I had made.”

The king now arose from his seat.

“Our agreement will be implemented,” he said, and I realized he wanted to leave things as they are.

“You may make wrong choices,” the king then said as he looked at me, “and you might do things that everyone criticizes. If you don’t make such mistakes later, you will have realized something. It will always be a continual process of learning.”

It was like asking what kind of fat you wanted to eat with your fat: Useless words.

“That’s what Your Majesty told me when I woke up from my wound.”

“Since your loss of memory, you have not taken a single step away from your past mistakes. Also, I know you will not be able to move forward.”

“This is also what your Majesty said.”

The king slumped back into his throne and said, “If you have something to say, don’t let me get in the way.”

At those words, I spoke, for I had been waiting to do so.

“There have only been fifty-six minor skirmishes in the past year.”

The king frowned at my sudden statement. I didn’t care and started listing the gains I had made as I stood before him. The tens of thousands of orcs, more than 20,000, that we had defeated, and the fact that I had slain their king, the Warlord. The unsealing of the kingdom’s tower and the circumvention of the treaty, allowing the training of wizards.

The recent successes that the kingdom’s envoys had in concluding negotiations with the dwarves. The fact that this has laid the foundation for a profitable business that would continue even after the kingdom has shored up its financial shortfalls.

It was with an extremely cold expression that the king was staring at me. He seemed to think that I was putting up a show to praise myself.

But I didn’t want to list all the troubles I went through. I wanted to ask something. And so did.

“So, where are you right now? And where were you?”

While I was fighting monsters in the north, while I was negotiating with the imperial ambassador to regain the use of the spire, and while I was parlaying with the dwarves, I wanted to know where the king was and what he was doing.

“Are you trying to admonish me in my own hall right now?” came the king’s rebuke, and he pretended to be dignified. I laughed and asked again, “I have taken many steps, so what about Your Majesty? What did you do?”

“You dare!”

I studied the king’s face: Even while it was bloodshot with extreme anger, it looked like a corpse’s visage. Corpse, it was an apt description.

The day when the great vision failed, time stopped for the king. He became a man that only recycled resentment and hatred throughout his being in an endless loop. It

was as if one of the Death Knights had become stuck in their past, repeating the same motions and emotions over and over again.

This king was no different from the dead.

“Even a single step?” I asked.

“I won’t listen to this anymore!”

“Did Your Majesty take even a single step?”

“I won’t listen, I said.”

“If you had gone ahead, what would your steps have been?”

The king jumped from his seat as he stared at me. His was an anger-filled face. Still, it was all just empty rage that flowed uselessly into the void.

“Knights, get inside here!” the king cried out, and the doors to the hall opened.

“Get this thing out, now!”

The palace knights approached slowly, hesitantly. They didn’t dare drag me out; they just hung around on the periphery. I looked at the man on the dais. The king’s age was over forty, which was still too young for him to be called an old man. However, if the definition of an old man was someone who lived in the past and hid behind the screens of the stage, then the king was indeed an old man.

He hid himself in a throne that no longer fit his body.

“Between Your Majesty and I, who is the one who is still standing?”

He was a stubborn old man who got angry just because he could not answer a little prince’s questions.

“What are you palace knights doing!?” the king demanded as he ridiculed their inaction.

Shek.

Someone grabbed onto my sleeve. I turned and found myself looking into a wrinkled face. It was the Marquis of Bielefeld. He quietly shook his head.

“Your Majesty, my king, His Highness the First Prince will be stepping back,” the old man said calmly and pulled on my sleeve. We stepped from the hall.

“Your Highness,” the Marquis of Bielefeld said, “Would you like to talk with me for a moment?”

I did not refuse his request. “Let’s go to my palace,” I said and led the marquis to the First Palace. Carls visibly brightened when he saw me, but corrected his glee when he saw that the old marquis was following me.

“I need a private talk with the marquis.”

Carls glanced at the other knights to see whether they had grasped the meaning of my curt order.

Those who had followed me to Winter Castle quickly sent out all the knights newly stationed to the First Palace. I went in only after all the palace knights had been driven out, and the doors thudded shut.

“Your Highness,” Adelia said and bowed her head. She had been tidying my bed. “It’s because I like it,” came her justification as I stared at her. A woman with the skills of a Sword Master was making up beds. “Please do not take away my joy,” she demurely said.

Faced with her consistent attitude, I felt a bit better after having been alone with the king.

“Shall we serve tea?” Adelia, who has become quite shameless, asked me with a smile.

“I think whiskey is better than tea,” the marquis answered, and I frowned at him.

“I didn’t know that it is wise to enjoy a daytime drink,” I stated.

“If the person is strong, it matters not,” came the marquis’s impudent response.

Adelia smiled at his words and quickly placed two glasses and a bottle on the table.

“If you have need of anything else, please send for me,” Adelia said and left us. I stared at her as she exited and then asked the marquis, “So what do you mean to tell me?”

The marquis made sure that the door was closed and then picked up his filled glass. He emptied it in one gulp and then smacked his lips together in satisfaction.

“How do you feel?” the marquis asked, and seeing me frown, added, “I’m asking if you’re a little excited.”

I stared at the marquis after he had asked me such a blatant question. I couldn’t be sarcastic, and things didn’t seem encouraging. I would be too embarrassed to admit this before the marquis.

So, instead of answering, I drank whiskey.

I took a moment to organize my thoughts while my mouth blazed. I had pushed the king, who considers me a thorn in his backside, into a corner. I had reclaimed my body, and as a bonus, I have been recognized as the successor of the throne.

“It feels different than I thought it would,” I finally stated. Instead of being happy, the resentment that had lurked in the corner of my heart now felt greater than ever.

“I dare say, it must have felt like persecuting a powerless old man,” came the marquis’s blatant comment, and I could not refute his words. His words exactly matched the feelings I felt but a while ago, so I could not deny them in the slightest.

Even if he had not won them through battle, I still felt like I was forcibly taking away the possessions of an old, worn out and exhausted man.

I drank again, and the taste of the alcohol was as bitter as my heart. While I frowned and wiped my mouth, the marquis smiled.

“It is the way of the world,” the marquis stated. I didn’t think it was funny, as I listened to the marquis talk about the reasons for things occurring in the world.

I suddenly felt dizzy.

My past as a sword was an incomplete existence, wherein strength and violence was all that mattered. I wracked my wisdom to gain insight into everything.

Up to this point, I was nothing but a child who had accidentally obtained a sword that was too good for him. I only realized this fact after mixing with people and wearing Adrian's body for a while. I could only admit my foolishness after I became a Sword Master.

"The son cannot see the way his father has taken, and the father cannot see his mature son along straight lines."

Now I thought I knew what the Marquis was talking about.

"It's not that kind of relationship," I said as I filled the marquis's empty glass and then mine.

We clinked our glasses and emptied them at once.

"But I'll listen to you, this once," I said as I held the bottle, which seemed to have been half-emptied in mere moments.

"We will need more whiskey," the marquis stated.

"We will die if we only drink, and eat nothing."

"We must have some snacks, then."

"A man can only wish," I replied.

"I will tell many stories yet, so why don't we fill our stomachs?"

As the marquis said this, I clapped my hands. Adelia appeared, having awaited my summons. I asked her to bring some simple fare, and it wasn't long before so many platters were stacked before us that we couldn't eat it all, even if we ate all night.

I bit into a piece of jerky as I sank deep into the sofa and waited for the marquis to begin his tale.

"Since your opportunity to become the king of this realm has arrived, I will tell you everything, right from the beginning."

The marquis's eyes deepened.

“It was about twenty years ago, and His Majesty had just ascended to the throne.”

The Marquis of Bielefeld had such a rich voice that it felt as if my mind had been transported twenty years into the past. The story began. It was the history of the kingdom that was unknown to me, a royal secret that none spoke of.

It was about the tyranny of the strong and the fleeting resistance of the weak.

I drank in silence. I simply filled my glass when it was empty, emptied it when it was full, and listened to the marquis’s story until as the night passed.

His was a tale filled with tearful efforts and would be a difficult one to hear had I not drunk. It was a story about a man who worked hard for a great time, only to have his limbs severed, and eventually, his will broken.

It was also a long, long story that seemed without end. However, there was no such thing as an endless story in this world, so the marquis’s story did end after some time.

‘Thuk,’ came the sound as the marquis’s head struck the table, with him passing out just like that. I quietly summoned my palace knights.

“Your Highness, what is this?” Carls asked with wide eyes as he saw the fainted marquis, his head resting in a puddle of whiskey and among rice cakes.

“It’s a cumbersome thing to explain, so just lay him out in any room,” I ordered.

Carls nodded and did what I told him to do.

I stared at the bottle and then grabbed it.

“It’s really not enough,” I muttered as I downed it. I suddenly looked into the clear glass of its bottom, so I threw it aside and buried myself in the sofa.

“It is lost, but not taken away…”

I had learned many things thanks to the marquis, but my head got muddled by all the complexities as well.

I was not given the time to organize my thoughts.

‘Dookdookdook,’ someone pounded on my door. The sound echoed like cannon fire in my hungover mind.

“How dare you!” I shouted as I grabbed Twilight and ran from the room.

“Your Highness!” Carls cried as he came to me. His face was filled with an urgency I had never before seen.

“Explain while we go!” I ordered. It seemed that there was no time for hesitation.

I just wished I could forcibly awaken my body.

# CHAPTER 108
# WHO DARES TO DISCUSS QUALIFICATIONS? (2)

"What?"

When Lionel Leonberger awoke from his nightmare, the first thing he did was grope under his pillow. A cool, hard texture reached his fingertips, and he grabbed onto something and pulled it out. It was a rusty dagger.

As he held the blade in his hand, the anxiety that had remained like scraps at the edges of his mind subsided somewhat. Only then did he feel his burning thirst.

He grabbed the jug standing by his bed and brought the entire thing to his lips.

'Glug, glug, glug,' he drank and almost retched at the fishy taste of the water. He forced himself to endure the foulness as he continued to drink. The water wet his throat and cooled his insides, and his momentary confusion subsided.

He suddenly felt better.

As he turned his head, he saw a woman who quietly slept next to him, with a somewhat distracted expression on her face.

It was the queen.

"Ah…" Lionel gasped, for seeing the queen jarred loose his memories of the prior night. After returning from his hall, he had begun to drink alone. When the queen returned, they had talked together and soon started tilting back glasses. The queen got drunk and fell asleep.

He now knew that the fishy taste was not due to the water, but rather the fact that he had drunk too much last night. This was due to his foolishness. He scolded himself for self-medicating, for it was not good if the monarch tried to cure his troubles with alcohol. Lionel shook his head once and looked at the queen.

Even though only in her mid-thirties, she was suffering. Still, the look he gave his

wife was a dry one. He looked at her skin, smooth as jade. The long scar that ran across her slender shoulder came into his sight. Something sharp skimmed through his mind, so he gently pulled the blanket over her shoulder. He got up from the bed, careful not to wake the queen.

Lionel stood at the window and looked out, the moonlight falling upon him.

He saw movement in that light: Palace knights dressed in their golden armor moved below the palace walls. The knights usually stood as stock-still as statues at their posts, but tonight they seemed busy for some reason. The number of knights Lionel could see was several times more than usual.

'Chek chek chak chek,' came an unusual sound from outside the door. It was the sound of a heavily armored knight moving. The hair stood upright on the king's back.

He put his dagger down and grabbed the sword he had mounted as a wall decoration.

Unlike common decorative swords, this was a real iron sword; its sharp blade unsheathed so that it could be used at any time.

"Sire?" the queen called to him as she woke up.

"Shh, something must have happened."

The queen did not reply. She got up quietly, threw on her coat, and came to stand next to her husband.

'Dook dook!' someone knocked on the door.

"Your Majesty? It's Schmilde Stuttgart."

Lionel Leonberger lowered his sword. It was Count Stuttgart, the captain of the palace knights and a champion of the kingdom.

"Can I come inside?"

The king turned his head, saw that the queen was getting dressed, and told Schmilde that he could enter.

“What’s this fuss in the middle of the knight?” Lionel demanded.

The old knight glanced at the sword in the king’s hand, bowed his head, and reported on the situation outside.

“There was an intruder in the dungeons. All the palace knights and guards who were guarding there were found dead. They are drained of blood.”

An uncommon frown came to Lionel’s features as he listened to Schmilde, the Nogisa, blur his words as he reported.

“They were drained of blood?”

“It is impossible to know whether the blood has been sucked from them and whether the intruder is human.”

“Is this blood-draining the work of a vampire?”

The old knight shook his head and said, “I don’t know at this time.”

“What of the gates?”

“All have been sealed off, Your Majesty. Three or more knights have been stationed at each, so nothing can enter or exit.”

The queen listened to the exchange between the king and Schmilde and intervened by asking, “What about the princes and princesses?”

“The palace knights have been sent to guard them. But,” and here the old knight stared at the king before carefully speaking on, “the whereabouts of His Highness the Third Prince is unknown. The Dragon Slayer is also gone.”

Before Lionel Leonberger could even respond, a loud noise came from outside.

“We have determined the whereabouts of the lost third prince!” came the reports of a knight as he stumbled in.

“Speak. Where is the third prince?”

At the king’s words, the palace knight knelt and said, “His Highness the Third Prince

is blocking off the front of the palace and cutting down the palace knights! He is heading straight here!"

There came a tumultuous noise from outside as the knight gave his report.

"Nooo!"

"Aouch!"

A series of terrible screams rang out, and then all was silent once more.

The palace knights stood in rank below, against the door, swords drawn and shields readied. Guards took up their bows and took in their positions.

'Dwaak!' the palace's main gate was smashed inward, and something flew through the opening.

'Kudangatangtang,' came the sound as an unidentified armored individual rolled across the floor and groaned.

It was Prince Maximilian, his body bloodied.

'Wakadakaka!'

Before the second prince had even lifted his sword, a shimmering flash flew through the dust that had been kicked up by the sundered door.

"Stop it!" the king cried out urgently.

The king didn't care how desperate his voice sounded; he was just relieved to see the palace knights standing before the second prince with their shields at the ready.

The king was worried, and this was evident in his frown. He couldn't make out distinct voices due to the distance, but the sound of sword slices came clearly to his ears.

"Don't block! Avoid, avoid!" came the urgent shout of the second prince.

The warning came too late, for barely had the words left the prince's lips when a blade slashed through the bodies of the ranked palace knights.

The king groaned as he watched the upper bodies of the palace knights flop to the floor, their torsos cut clean through their shields. Maximilian staggered to his feet, and Prince Gillian Leonberger appeared.

His flowing hair covered half his face, and he was holding Dragon Slayer in one hand.

Red eyes glinted from under his hair.

“This guy!”

The king watched as Maximilian charged at Gillian, with mana gathering on the tip of his sword.

It was clear to everyone’s eyes that the second prince was no match for the third prince. He did have momentum on his side, though, and the second prince managed to land a kick before blades flashed, and Maximilian once more rolled to the floor, in great peril.

“Sir Schmilde! Go save Maximilian!” the king commanded.

The Nogisa’s answer was firm, “Your Majesty, I cannot leave your side.”

“The future of the kingdom is over there!”

“To me, Your Majesty is the future of the kingdom.”

The old knight did not budge, even upon the king’s strident command.

The king looked down once more, his face distorted.

The palace knights who had shielded the second prince had not been able to block his blow, and their bodies had been cleaved in twain. Arrows loosed by the guards did not even come near the third prince.

“Sire! Where are you!? Your Majesty’s son is here!” came the shouting of the third prince as he looked around. His voice held the unstable timbre of the typical madman.

There was no way that he would slice into the king’s knights and attack his brother in the king’s chambers without being mad.

“Why don’t you show up before your son!?”

Is this a coup? The king thought.

No- If it was a revolution, there would have been factions that followed Gillian. The third prince was alone. He had just grabbed Dragon Slayer and ran wild as he began his slaughter.

All the guards had died in an instant. Soldiers and knights were constantly facing the third prince, but they were unable to stop him.

“Will you come out if I do this!?” the third prince cried as he sliced through a palace knight and dumped his body to one side, and then charged at the second prince.

Maximilian’s sword was sliced in two as he blocked a blow from his prone position. Gillian stepped on the second prince’s chest and aimed Dragon Slayer at his brother.

“If you don’t come out now, I can’t guarantee my brother’s comfort!”

The king watched this scene play out, his teeth clenched.

“Sir Schmilde!”

“Even if Your Majesty banishes me because of this, I cannot leave your side now.”

The king burst into a fit of anger as he heard these words and roared, “I will go over there!”

“Sire!”

“You do your job, Nogisa, and only that! You shouldn’t be stopping me!”

The king grabbed his sword and left the room. The queen followed him. The Nogisa sighed and led his palace knights to the bottom.

“Oh! Oh! Here you are now!” Gillian shouted in glee as he saw the king.

“You are insane. You won’t do this without being mad. You are definitely not sane,” the king said as he ground his teeth and looked around. He took in the corpses of palace knights, cut in half. Their bodies were shrunken as if all the blood had been

drained from them. This state was consistent through all the corpses, just as the Nogisa had said.

We are at least saved the trouble of finding out who the fuck attacked the dungeons, King Lionel thought. It seems that Gillian has no intention of hiding his atrocities.

“An idiotic and incompetent man is set to take the throne, take the kingdom! How can I not go mad!?” the third prince anxiously cried as he lifted Dragon Slayer into the air. “Can’t you see, Your Majesty!? Dragon Slayer has not accepted anyone in four centuries! But it has accepted me! Isn’t this proof that I am the next king!?” the third prince shouted and laughed as he showed Dragon Slayer off. It sounded as if screeching demons flowed from his mouth and from the sword.

“You are insane. You are not just mad! You’re completely, insanely mad. You dare kill my knights and slaughter my guards? You dare do this and think you will be safe?”

“Oh! It seems that it’s not enough to be the master of Dragon Slayer. But… Your Majesty has no choice, either way.”

“To dare do something so-“

“If all the men who have Leonberger’s blood die,” came Gillian’s interruption, as his red eyes flashed under his tangled hair, “Your Majesty will have no choice!”

The third prince now raised his sword. Maximilian did not move; he had passed out.

“Yes!? Stop! Do you think I will hand you the throne after seeing what you are!?”

“Oh, it doesn’t matter. If you won’t give it, I’ll just take it away,” Gillian said as he put the sword against his brother’s heart and applied pressure to the hilt.

‘Wikudududududu!’ a bluish brilliance cut through the dark aura that had entered the room and slammed into the third prince, saving Maximilian’s life by milliseconds.

‘Dwang!’ Gillian managed to block the blue flash with Dragon Slayer, and shouted, “What kind of man dares face me!?”

“It’s me, you bastard!” a voice roared from beyond the door, and the first prince appeared.

A bright glow enveloped his sword, and King Lionel began to shed tears.

Adrian's sudden appearance was a surprise, but the most unusual presence was the brilliant flash, and the great concentration of energy gathered at the tip of his sword.

It was not just the king who was caught off guard; no, everyone was amazed by the magnitude of such momentous magic.

Such a level of power was only expected in knights who had trained and battled throughout their lives and finally reached completion in their later years.

"Aura Blade!" someone shouted as they understood what they were seeing.

The young prince, only seventeen, had learned to do the impossible.

Prince Adrian lowered his sword as he walked toward Prince Gillian.

'Tuku, tuku, tuku,' so great was the silence that only the footsteps of the first prince could be heard as they echoed through the hall.

'Chik,' the footsteps finally stopped, and the first prince quietly spoke.

"Who are you?"

# CHAPTER 109
# WHO DARES TO DISCUSS QUALIFICATIONS? (3)

“Did I provoke you?”

“Shut up. I’m not asking you for the throne,” came the third prince’s tense voice, a voice that pretended to be relaxed. He raised his sword before him, shaking as if in a seizure.

“Your Highness!? Be careful!”

“Highness!”

Urgent warnings flooded my way, but I didn’t raise a single eyebrow. I had freed myself from all oppression. I was a hero who had reached perfection when I had ascended to the level of Sword Master. I took out my anger on the third prince, who had stolen my true body.

“Huh!?” the third prince groaned in confusion as he took on a firm stance.

“What the hell are you doing?” I demanded. There was my body!

My body, which I had failed to awaken. Here it was, with that enormous energy that I had accumulated throughout my life. And it had awoken.

This meant that an entity unknown to me must have taken over.

It wasn’t that idiot, Adrian. He was far too stupid to wake my body up by himself. His soul was too boring. I looked around and noticed the dead and shriveled bodies.

It was a trace of the powerful gluttony of the magical sword.

I glared at my body again.

It was revealed in all its fearsome might and probably infested by a being who took over the bodies of others and fed on their energies.

Wow… Twilight trembled in my grasp. The power and momentum streaming from my body shook the hall. No reaction came from the unknown being that had occupied my body.

The predacious entity which had expelled such great energy and glutted itself on blood acted as if it was a normal sword now. As if it did not exist.

“If you don’t want to reveal yourself, we will have to do this the hard way.”

I reached out my hand and grabbed at my body, still in the hardened hands of the third prince.

Well, I tried to take it, but I couldn’t.

‘Quazzik!’ a terrible cold suddenly burst from it. I instinctively withdrew my hand. My high-quality leather combat glove was white with frost.

‘Quap!’ the glove tore apart when I squeezed my hand into a fist. I shook my hand, trying to dispel the dark chill that had invaded my body. If I had been just a second slower, my hand would have frozen, and my eyes would have misted up.

I knew all too well why I had been blasted with frost. It happened when someone who was not the owner of my body touched it. It also meant that my body now had a master.

“See!? It cannot be touched by the unworthy, by someone with no qualifications to touch it,” a puffy voice cried out. I turned my head and looked on as the first laughed at me, his face cheerful.

“Because only those chosen by the great spirits of our ancestors can touch this blade. Only those of the true dragon,” Gillian said, “and the spirits of the ancestors chose me.”

It seemed that he held a sense of accomplishment, believing that the sword had chosen him.

I clucked my tongue and said, “You’re stupid.”

“What?” he asked as he frowned at me.

“Do you really think you’ve been chosen as the sword’s wielder?”

“It looks unbelievable, but yeah, I was,” he said as he laughed at me. His was a type of laughter that revealed a smug assurance of victory.

Seeing a guy such as him, I also began laughing.

“You are not the chosen owner.”

He was chosen, but he was not chosen to be an owner.

He had been chosen as a slave. No, he didn’t even deserve to be called a slave.

“You are just a sacrifice.”

It was merely the greedy instincts of the magic sword: To select prey to soothe its centuries-long hunger. In fact, Gillian had been aging rapidly from the very moment that he had stopped slaughtering. Wrinkles unseen in young men had set in along his mouth, and his skin had become flabby. If he couldn’t find someone to take over the sword, he would soon become completely drained, becoming nothing more than a desiccated mummy. His moment of destruction was already approaching, and only he seemed unaware of this fact.

“No matter how much you talk, nothing changes,” the third prince said.

I hadn’t been able to wake up my body, the sword, even when I had held it. This could be seen as a sign of being ill-suited for the throne, but I had not denied my father. The third prince, however, did.

“From now on, I will lead this country!” he declared, stating that he was the only king.

It was so familiar to me: The ignorance of fools and the vanity of the inept. They were all as moths around a flame, and holding onto a deadly magic sword due to being blinded by your past greed is no different.

And the end wouldn’t be different, either. All moths fly into the fire.

I sighed.

“Since this will be the second one in so short a time, my karma must really be great,” I sarcastically mumbled. Although none of it was intentional, I had hurt two descendants of my friend Gruhorn, after promising that I would look after his bloodline.

My heart was heavy. The power of my sword sapped Gillian even more. Still, he did not shake off that pressure, nor did he deny it. He held on and lifted my true body into the air.

“Your Highness!? The second prince’s rescue is done!” Arwen informed me, just in time.

All the injured had been evacuated. From now on, I could run wild.

“It is my time!” the foolish blood descendant of Leonberger cried and then looked around as he ground his teeth.

All who now remained were my knights, the kingdom’s champion Nogisa, as well as the top-ranked palace knights. And there was the king and queen.

“It doesn’t matter. Your Majesty is left here with me,” the third prince said as he quickly corrected his expression. “I will cut the necks of Your Majesty and my brothers here in the palace, and I will find and destroy all of Leonberger’s flesh before this night is over.”

The light shone brighter in Gillian’s eyes as he gibbered and laughed as if it was great fun for him to think of such slaughter. “And I will be the king of this country!”

And at that moment, a tremendous surge of energy flowed from his body.

“Behold!”

A mighty energy, close to that of a Sword Master.

“This is the power of the Dragon Slayer! See me! Feel me! And praise me!” the third prince cried out, his tone so intense.

I shook my head.

“That’s not the power of the sword.”

It was rather the energy of life, existing naturally within each being from birth.

It's possible that, if you devoted yourself over time, you might have risen on your own, I thought with some bitterness.

He could have enjoyed human life itself, over decades and even up to a hundred years.

It was just Gillian's final flame, his life-stuff burning up all at once.

I closed my eyes for a moment, and countless thoughts came and went in and out of my head.

The stupid and foolish third son of the royal family: Considering his true nature and abilities, only his greed proves exceptional. My father and other brother are true: I will finally ascend to the throne. Even having such a sword speaks of the glory of the kingdom, but now this boy's instincts are being dominated by his spirit.

I opened my eyes.

I saw the third prince. Sudden aging was occurring as his face so rapidly withered until it resembled the face of someone I knew. I turned my head, and there was the king.

His old face looked surprisingly identical to that of his crazy son.

"The empire tried to break the spirit of the kingdom by adding clauses and articles to the treaty from time to time."

The conversation I had with the Marquis of Bielefeld came to my mind.

"All of the successors to the throne were to undertake a compulsory five-year education at the Imperial Academy in the Empire before they turned thirteen. Countless other unreasonable demands were made, and His Majesty refused to accept any of them. In return, the knights and nobles loyal to His Majesty went missing or were interrogated. Among them was Her Majesty the Third Queen, birth mother of His Majesty the Second Prince, and Her Majesty the Second Queen, birth mother of the other princes."

The tale the marquis told me concerned a monarch of a small country.

“It was not that they pushed on and on, but it was the powerless King of Leonberg that didn’t back down.”

The king was said to have endured to the very end while being driven to the edge of a cliff.

I barely understood it, his tenacity in the face of a foregone defeat.

And now I had to strike my sword at the little prince in front of his old father.

For the first time, the sorrows and woe of the man, crushed under the weight of the crown and wearing the ill-fitting garb of a king, touched my soul.

‘Gwhoo-wooh-wooh’ I fixed my sword before me in a two-handed grip. And I saw poor Gillian.

I had brought my energy to its peak. The energy blossoming from the third prince’s body also became ever-greater.

He laughed at me, and said, “I hated you from the beginning.”

“I also hated you.”

“That’s great!”

The third prince raised his sword and charged at me. The magic sword was now rapidly consuming the prince’s remaining vitality, and it spewed out frost as if it was huffing and puffing.

As I looked at it, I recited a brief poem in my mind. It was part of the legend of the Dragon Slayer that Gillian so longed for.

‘Krambral!’ Twilight cried as it also sang out the myth of the true dragon.

The verse became power, and it broke into the world with destruction.

As if to thaw the foe, Twilight cut through the spreading cold air and made contact with the body of poor Gillian beyond the frost.

The third prince stopped in mid-stride, without lowering his raised sword.

“Ah…?” he groaned as his gaze turned to his arms.

‘Dluk, tluk!’ both his arms, severed at the elbows, flopped to the floor. His hands still grasped the black hilt of the sword.

“Aalals? Uhhh…?” the third prince stupidly moaned as he sank to the ground. Decades he had never lived weighed heavily on his face. Gillian stared at his withered and husk-like forearms: So dry were they that they would not bleed.

As I took it all in, I remembered the moment when I had first met the third prince. The little prince had approached me, concealing his intent to step over his brother and so make his name. Now that I think about it, it had merely been the competitive spirit and drive of a child.

“But now, I do not like what you did.”

I raised my sword.

Those deprived of life by [Power of Gluttony] experience terrible pain before they die.

I will end his pain with my own hand.

‘Zchuuk,’ a small noise came from somewhere, and an arrow pierced the forehead of the third prince.

And there stood the king, bow in hand.

The king who had punished a traitor, the father who had killed his son, stood there.

So said the king: “Burn the traitor’s corpse. Recover the dead knights and soldiers.”

He tried to hide the grief that had welled up in and around his eyes by acting as the grim monarch with his mouth. And I saw him for the first time.

I saw the soul of a real king, not the soul I had believed possessed only modest power.

He had to lose what was his before he refused to back down.

And now the soul of that poor man who had to even lose his son was finally bared before my eyes.

The king looked at me.

'Jirkf, jirkf,' came the sound of his leather boots as he walked.

And as he came before me, he bowed his head. The king took the sword out of the grasp of the third prince's withered forearms.

He suddenly offered the sword to me and said, "Yours."

That single word meant so much to me.

Funny enough — I couldn't accept the sword.

For the first time, I realized the true weight of succession to the throne, which I had once supposed was just a bonus that came along with the reclamation of my true body.

It seemed it wasn't just the king who fought on and pressed forward, regardless of the consequences.

Did I truly once discuss the king's qualifications with an arrogant gaze?

"Receive." The king pushed the sword back at me. I carefully reached out with both hands and accepted it.

The king turned about, summoned his knights, and told them to leave the hall.

The queen came to me and hugged me tightly.

"Do not curse His Majesty for the fact that he is a father who sheds neither blood nor tears," her grief-filled voice rang through my ears. "His Majesty simply does not want his son, who will ascend the throne, to bear the burden of taking his brother's life."

I was left speechless and could not give any answer.

All I could do was watch the king and queen from behind as they left. Wow…

In that instant, my true body in my hands cried out, and someone talked to me.

# CHAPTER 110
# HOW WILL SPRING COME WITHOUT WINTER'S PASSING? (1)

"Please, save me."

The voice was so faint at first that I could not know who it was. I did tremble for a while, and then I found out in no time at all.

"Please take me out."

His voice possessed a strange terror. He sounded urgent, as if he was being chased by something. I looked around, pretending not to hear anything. Knights and soldiers moved around me, but I couldn't see anyone who paid particular notice to me: They were all tending to the corpses.

Only my own knights were looking at me, awaiting orders.

"Let's go back," I said. I then led my knights to the First Palace.

"You can hear me, right? Please take me out. Please. If you hear me, just answer me."

'Chookluk,' I locked the door after I had walked into my room. And then I spoke.

"Do it step by step. Explain it to me in a way that is easy to understand."

"Anything, just get me out of here right now. Please."

Even after I had spoken, he just repeated his pleas as he asked me to get him out.

"Please, get me out right away!" the guy shouted in extreme terror, and then suddenly fell silent. I waited for him to speak once more.

"Please…" I heard a voice that came so faint that I had to concentrate to catch it.

“Please take me out…”

As I listened to him cry like a terrified child, I became convinced.

“There is something in there.”

There was something in my true body, and it wasn’t the idiot Adrian.

It was an unidentified being that had awakened the sleeping sword to a limited extent, enthralled the little prince, and finally sucked him dry as a sacrifice.

“Tell me. Is there anyone else in there, other than you?”

The idiot didn’t answer me. That made me think that he was afraid of something eavesdropping in on us. It felt as if he was afraid that something would get angry if he spoke too loosely.

I became more confident in my assessment.

It was obvious that Adrian was terrified due to the fact that something had taken over my body, pretending to be Dragon Slayer.

“I need to know the situation so that I can help you,” I calmly said as I tried to comfort the ugly guy. Currently, my body treated me as if I was someone else. I couldn’t study the situation inside my body without using the idiot as an intermediary. However, I first had to calm him down if I were to figure out what was going on.

After soothing him for a long time, he finally spoke.

“There is someone in here with me.”

“Who is it?”

“Oh… I don’t know. Me, I just hid. I suddenly got scared and hid. If I get caught, I think something bad will happen…”

I listened to the helpless guy, then asked, “So where is it now?”

“It disappeared after you spoke, But it’s definitely still here. I can feel it.”

I asked him many more times, but I couldn't gain a clear answer.

He just told me of vague feelings, saying that something was in there with him and that that unknown something was terrible.

My head began to hurt. Something was obviously happening, but I couldn't know what it was. My thoughts felt cramped. I quietly racked my head for answers. However, no matter how much I worried, no answer came. I've never imagined that someone other than I would be in my true body. I was greatly surprised even when I found out that the idiot's soul had entered it.

As I was struggling with my own thoughts, the idiot whispered to me, "Ha… not alone."

"What?"

He had whispered, but now he gave the mental equivalent of a shout as if having a seizure, "What's in here!? Not alone! It's so cramped in here! There are lots of strange things here!" #

My mind went blank as I listened: As if I had been struck in the head.

"No, it didn't come in suddenly… they've been in here from the beginning. It must have been from the moment that I came inside — No, maybe long before that! I can sense it clearly! You can't even imagine… Please, take me out… please, please! Please! Just get me out of this hellish place…"

The stupid guy, who had been so silent for a while, now poured his thoughts and pleas into my mind. The only things contained in him were unclean emotions: Fear, paranoia, and confusion. Just listening to him made my head reel. Then, in a moment, his voice stopped.

A sudden silence entered my mental realm.

"Are you there?" I asked the idiot. "If you hear me, answer me."

His voice was no longer heard. I made sure to speak with him until the night was over, but he gave no reply. The day dawned bright.

"Your Highness."

I was sitting on the sofa and looking at the light that crept through the curtains when Adelia came to me. She entered, and then visibly stiffened when she saw that I sat alone in the dark room.

“Have you sat there all night?” she asked with some concern.

Now, why would this bother her?

I shook my head in reprobation, despite my stiff neck, but I later realized why she had asked it.

I had been sitting alone in a dark room, wearing dusty clothes and my combat gloves, and holding a sword. Perhaps it was not such a good image for others to see.

“I will fetch water for bathing,” Adelia said as she opened the curtains wide. She then left without awaiting my response. When she reappeared, she was holding a basin of hot water and had brought clean clothes.

Adelia stared at me as she carefully wiped my face with a damp towel. I noticed she had something to say.

“Your Highness,” she finally said as she bowed her head several times. “It’s not Your Highness’s fault. As her voice crept into my mind, I realized that she had been worried about me all night long. It wasn’t unexpected.

In the eyes of others, what I went through last night must have been a bitter experience. Even if our relationship had been bad, any man would feel terrible if he were to sever his brother’s arms.

To be truthful, I didn’t feel very good, but my pain did not lie where Adelia thought it lay.

I was compassionate, sure, but my relationship with the third prince had not been so deep that I mourned his death.

“Adelia, you’ve grown up a lot,” I said as I caught a few strands of her hair and playfully wrapped them around my finger, finally releasing them.

“Your Highness!” she shouted, confused by my sudden change in behavior. I was surprised myself.

“Adelia,” I said as I stared at her, “if you want, you can stay in the capital.”

She raised her head and looked at me blankly.

“Your whole family is here.”

Due to the harsh northern climate, Adelia’s family had remained in the capital. I now regretted that I had called her family to the capital and then dragged her to the north.

“If you want, I can make sure that you stay here.”

Even if it was a whim, it was my whim. It was also something I would never have done had I not looked into the eyes of a father who had lost his son a scant few hours ago.

Yet, I was serious: I wanted to give Adelia time to spend with her family until I returned to the capital. Adelia stared at me. She didn’t seem very happy with my offer.

“Your Highness must visit His Majesty,” she said, not answering my proposal. Her voice had become somewhat cold. “You must get ready.”

Before I could say anything, she undressed me and then dressed me in the fresh clothes.

“Ouch,” I said, as she tied my hair somewhat rougher than usual. “That was a little painful.”

“Sorry,” she said, and I was not sorry to hear that voice. It was absurd, for even if there was pain, I was happy at the same time. It was a great wonder that Adelia, who trembled whenever I looked at her, and who had reluctantly followed me for the sake of her family, treated me this much.

The karma that still had to be balanced between us existed like a spanned net, but it felt like the knots had begun to loosen. I laughed at the thought of it.

I felt a sense of liberation from her rough touch. It felt like my heavy head was getting a little lighter.

Suddenly, her hands stopped fixing my hair. She began to massage the muscles in my neck and shoulders. She did so with her usual gentle touch.

“Ah, that feels cool,” I muttered.

The stiffness and tension in my neck became greatly lessened relieved.

The worries that filled my head also faded.

* * *

With Adelia’s help, I felt ready to face the king, and so I went straight to the palace.

The atmosphere in the palace was still confused and cluttered due to the turmoil that had occurred last night. The servants who went to and fro, in and out of the palace, all wore crushed faces. The bearing of the guards and the knights was strict, and they were more alert than usual.

It was natural.

The chaos of last night was nothing more than a domestic scuffle if viewed on a small scale, but on a larger level, it was no different than an attempted coup.

The strange thing rather would have been if the aftermath was insignificant, seen as just a small rebellion caused by a single prince, and easily suppressed.

I walked through the upheaved palace until I came before the hall. The palace knights who were guarding the entrance saw me and immediately expressed their courtesy. There had never been a time when the palace knights had treated me wrongly, but that doesn’t mean that they had honored me more than was required. As palace knights, they had just discharged their formal duties toward a prince of the country.

However, the palace knights somehow seemed very reverent toward me now. I do not know whether it was because of my actions as a Sword Master the night before or due to something else.

They were as silent and inscrutable as always.

“His Highness the First Prince has arrived.”

“Enter,” came a heavy voice from inside the hall.

“Please enter,” the palace knights said as they opened the doors wide.

There were people who had arrived in the hall before me. Some of them were known to me, others not.

“Your Highness,” the Marquis of Bielefeld and Gung Jung-baek welcomed me as they slightly bowed their heads.

“Hello, brother,” the bandaged Maximilian said as he greeted me.

“Hm,” I mused. Even if they pretended not to, girls and boys of noble blood were staring at me. I had never before seen them, but as I studied their faces, I could see that Leonberger’s blood coursed through their veins. I looked at the princes and princesses and then headed to the dais.

I looked upon the king, who was staring at me.

“I’ve been calling you for a while, but you’ve only come now,” he said after a time, and his behavior was as unpleasant as usual. So, I responded as usual.

“I came as soon as possible to this place.”

* * *

The Marquis of Bielefeld heard of the uproar of the night before a bit later, after it was all done with. On a lesser level, a son had tried to kill his father and his brother. On the greater stage, a prince had tried to wrest the throne from the monarch.

It was a terrible tragedy, a blasphemous and disrespectful event.

The Marquis couldn’t help but feel sad. However, there remained one comfort.

It was the fact that the first prince had drawn his sword in the dead of night to save his father and end the coup.

The power the first prince had revealed in the process was enough even to elicit praise from Count Stuttgart, who was beyond stingy with his praise. The marquis could see a subtle change in the relationship between the first prince and the king,

attitudes he had never noted before. The marquis guessed that he had not punished his old body in vain the day before when he had told the first prince of the troubles that the king had gone through.

The marquis expected that the two royal men would now clear up the discord between them and publicly make peace. He had run to the hall at the king's call with his brutal hungover just to witness such a reconciliation.

"His Highness the First Prince has arrived."

And Prince Adrian finally entered the hall.

The marquis watched as the two royal men greeted one another.

"I've been calling you for a while, but you've only come now."

"I came as soon as possible to this place."

But what? The conversation between king and prince was completely different from what he had expected!

"Isn't the First Palace the closest one to my hall?"

"I don't know. I've never been to other's people's palaces."

"Huh! So you want to tell me that the messenger heading to the First Palace was particularly slow?"

"Perhaps."

The Marquis of Bielefeld closed his eyes, no longer wanting the see the king and the first prince growl at one another. Not one of them was giving an inch to the other, not one of them stepping back. The two royal men had not changed at all. They still didn't like one another, and it still seemed as if they were anxious to punch each other.

It would have been glorious if all the past discord could have been resolved with just a few words from the king. The marquis began to resent himself, feeling that his emotions were running too wild at his old age. If I hadn't expected it in vain, I wouldn't have been so disappointed.

“I expect that my eldest son, a member of the royal family, should know how to be ashamed in front of his brothers.”

The Marquis of Bielefeld had been struggling with his sorrowful heart but now opened his eyes. The king immediately came into his vision. Unexpectedly, the man’s face had the same unpleasant expression as usual. The Marquis thought that he must have heard wrong due to being less than awake. Surely, the king couldn’t have said the first prince was a member of the royal family? Had the words ‘eldest son’ really come from the king’s mouth?

“If you fail as a member of the royal family one more time, you will be punished.”

The Marquis of Bielefeld opened his eyes. He hadn’t heard those words wrong. Surprisingly, the king had told the first prince, who he had always considered as a traitor, to act as a member of the royal family, and he had said it twice.

Besides the overt message, what was the hidden meaning? At first glance, the words sounded like a reprimand, but they held a clear presence of forgiveness. The king had said that he would punish the prince if his conduct failed to be proper. The marquis studied Prince Adrian. He hoped that the first prince could understand the true meaning of his father’s words. He stood waiting, his mouth agape in anxiety.

“I am a member of the royal family,” the first prince said as he laughed. The moment the marquis heard that laugh, his heart rattled into a higher gear. His face took on the expression someone would have the moment before a major accident. The Marquis of Bielefeld hurried forward, hoping to prevent the inexperienced eldest son from rejecting the olive branch his father had extended to him. However, before the marquis could intervene, the first prince spoke.

“Well, Your Majesty…”

# CHAPTER 111
# HOW WILL SPRING COME WITHOUT WINTER'S PASSING? (2)

"Your Majesty said, 'Be a member of the royal family and set an example for others.' I can do nothing but take the initiative and serve as such an example."

I could see the Marquis of Bielefeld sigh in relief at my exemplary answer. I would not normally say this, but I felt a little like my docile answer.

"Keep in mind that power comes with responsibility. In the future, as the royal family, let us set an example for others and lead by taking the initiative."

I gave a bloody smile upon hearing the king's words.

"Why only in the future? How about right now?"

"Hear me out," I said as I looked at him. "If you bow before another country, can you be called a royal family which takes the initiative and the lead?"

The king's expression hardened.

"When I followed my uncle north, a spy was mixed in among the royal infantry that went with me. I had thought that it was one that Your Majesty had sent to watch over my uncle and me."

"That was the beginning of the year," a stern voice spoke up, and the king turned his face to look at the approaching man.

"Your Majesty, I posted that spy," said the royal courtier, Gung Jungbaek, as he stepped forward and knelt.

"Did you?"

"I am ashamed, but the situation at the time when His Highness the First Prince

headed north did not look very good."

"Count Balahard was there at his side, so you did something useless," the king said.

"If you choose to punish me, I will receive it readily."

The king tapped the throne's armrest.

It was no small crime that the royal courtier had dared to spy on a member of the royal family, and he had to be punished.

"If you wish to apologize, it should be to the person concerned, not to me," the troubled king stated, giving me the choice. It meant that whatever punishment or forgiveness was to be doled out would be doled out by me.

"Your Highness, I await your punishment."

"Okay. As you have admitted your wrongdoing, you will be punished."

I did not refuse the man's offer.

"I will gladly accept any punishment."

"Oh, it won't be a glad affair for you."

My choice was to punish Gung Jungbaek, not to forgive him.

"Because I have never seen someone with a slit throat be glad."

I had decided upon the most severe of punishments: The death penalty.

"He did it with an honest heart. The punishment is excessive," said the king.

I shook my head and said, "If it was done in honesty, he would have told Your Majesty."

I looked back and saw that Jungbaek was still gazing at us with a guilty face. But I could see that he also believed that he had not committed a mortal sin.

An impudent man.

“The spy was named Joseph and was mixed into the royal infantry. His purpose was not to monitor me, but to study Winter Castle and the political dynamics of the north as a whole.”

Jungbaek once more defended himself as he stood in front of the king. He said that his man was to be alert to any radical developments, to prepare the kingdom for an unforeseen conflict. He had no other motives.

Jungbaek’s excuses convinced the king.

“He wasn’t scouting the situation to plan a possible uprising. No, he wanted to grasp the dynamics of the north and then report his surveillance to his imperial handlers.”

“Your Majesty! I can’t handle this! All my life, I’ve been living only for the sake of the royal family’s well-being, as much as I live for it today! If I must die, I will die! But you cannot let me die with the stigma of serving two masters hanging around my neck.”

The king’s face seemed to spit blood, so great was his anger toward me.

“Gung Jungbaek’s family has served us Leonbergers from generation to generation as royal courtiers. I will not countenance the prince’s allegations.”

“Just because a father has loyally served the royal family with all his heart does not mean that his children would do the same,” I answered.

“You take giant leaps of speculation,” came the king’s reply.

“Your Majesty, Jungbaek is not who you think he is.”

Even the Marquis of Bielefeld stepped forward to defend the man.

“I see. I misunderstood,” I decided to say, and then stepped back. As I did, both the king and the marquis became rather confused. It seemed that they had expected me to push for Jungbaek’s punishment to the very end. They wondered what I was up to.

As they looked at me, I just shrugged.

The king then said that I had insulted Gung Jungbaek’s family, a family which had been loyal for generations, and ordered me confined to the palace for three days as

punishment for my frivolity. I accepted his verdict.

Of course, I had no intention to stay in the palace for three whole days.

After two days, a night filled with ambitious portent arrived. Gunn came to me, and I got up from my seat while I interpreted her hand signals.

“Then please do the rest,” I ordered her. She bowed her head and disappeared from my presence as if she was but wind. I led Arwen and Carls to a secret passage that led from the palace. I was afraid to escape from the royal palace, but we did so regardless.

“Did you enact my orders?” I asked Gunn. Instead of answering, she lifted her hood, which was of an exceedingly long cut. I noticed how unusually pale her face was.

She tapped her shoulders, which meant: “It was hard.”

Gunn took the lead, and we followed her. We wandered through the dark and twisting alleys of the capital until, finally, a prestigious mansion reared up before us. It was as huge as the First Palace, and it was guarded.

{Come this way} Gunn gestured as she guided us along the walls of the mansion.

{Wait here} she swiftly gestured, and we all halted as we hid ourselves in a dark spot of shadow against the wall.

‘swish, swish,’ a black-cloaked figure came from the mansion. As if he was about to vault a high wall or leap a wide ditch, the furtive man’s eyes darted in all directions for a while before he began striding away.

At that moment, I felt the presence of a mighty energy bloom from afar. It wasn’t on the level of a Sword Master, but it was close.

“Don’t move,” I ordered. The sound of heavily armored men moving in armor was heard as it echoed against the wall.

‘cheolkop, cheolkop, cheolkop.’

Then, palace knights and guards in golden armor appeared. The mansion was fully encircled and wholly besieged. A middle-aged knight appeared from among the

palace knights. I've seen him standing beside the Nogisa on several occasions, as he was the deputy commander of the palace knights.

"You have dared to intrude into the king's residence, and so deserve to die! But if you reveal yourself now, that will be taken into account and might gain you clemency!" the knight bellowed.

I watched the cloaked figure, who looked around in confusion at the sudden appearance of the palace knights and guards. Another group of men now ran to the knight.

"Do you dare kick up a fuss here? Do you know what this place is?" one of the men demanded.

"This is the imperial ambassadorial residence!" exclaimed another.

The knights and guards of the empire stood before the mansion. These were the soldiers guarding the Marquis of Montpellier.

"Who the hell dares make a fuss here in the middle of the knight?" an imperial knight, seemingly the leader, demanded as he stepped forward. "Why are the palace knights here in such numbers?"

"We tracked a man here who had invaded and then left the palace," the deputy-commander stated, and the imperial knight frowned.

"Are you accusing one of us?"

"Not in the slightest! I have already caught the culprit," the middle-aged knight said as he pointed straight at us. "You there! Come out!"

At that, I left the shadows and went to stand before the knights. Then, I flipped the hood from my head.

"Well, Your Highness? Why is your Highness here?" the middle-aged knight asked with wide eyes as he recognized me.

I watched the smirking palace knights and answered him with natural grace, "There is no moon out, and the air is so rich and thick. It is such a lovely night for taking a stroll. Is it not so?" I said, and as I asked that last question, I looked directly at the

man who had left the mansion.

He was surrounded by both palace knights and imperial knights, so he could not go here nor there. His posture was rigid as if set in stone.

“Grab that man, and make him kneel before me,” I ordered the palace knights. They enacted my orders without delay. I was certain now: My status in their eyes was different than before.

The black-cloaked ghost drew his sword and struggled desperately, but the court knights were the best of the best among the kingdom. And he wasn’t facing just one of them: Five or six rushed the man. His sword was instantly torn from his grasp, and he was made to kneel on the ground.

“Wait,” I ordered, and the palace knights paused before they removed the man’s hood.

“I will check for myself,” I told them.

“I am an unidentified person. Are you sure you wish to take the risk?”

He tried to threaten the palace knights in such a pathetic manner.

“I’m a Sword Master,” the man said, but that ploy wouldn’t work with me. I nodded, and the palace knights approached the figure and flipped his hood.

“Agh!”

“Why is the royal courtier here?”

The palace knights who recognized the ghost gasped in shock.

“I told you,” I said as I disregarded the reactions of those around me, “that your punishment won’t be a glad affair.”

At my words, Jungbaek’s face turned a deathly pale.

* * *

“Tell me how the hell it happened.”

I was with the king after the success of my ambitious excursion.

“I threw out the bait, and the fish bit into the hook.”

“And the fish was the royal courtier?”

I nodded. The king had publicly affirmed his loyalty to the man and had rebuked me for my rashness. I had not been careless; indeed, I had merely acted as if I was. By doing so, the empire’s spies would not skulk away due to feeling a prudent sense of crisis.

“How did you know?”

“I’ve had people attached to him from before.”

“And how did you guess Jungbaek was a spy?” the king asked.

I shook my head and said, “My people were not attached to the royal courtier from the start.”

My observers had not been put on Jungbaek but the imperial ambassador. I had ordered the swords-elves to watch the Marquis of Montpellier, to ensure that he stayed in line. This order had an unintended but profitable outcome: I learned the identities of all the people who covertly entered and exited the mansion of the marquis.

The swords-elves then stealthily followed these intimate guests, discovering their identities, and keeping track of their movements. Surprisingly, the royal courtier was among the informants, the very man who oversaw the great affairs of the royal palace, and to an extent, the capital. The king stretched his eyes as he heard my explanation.

“Do you have a list?”

Without a word, I removed a sealed envelope from my chest pocket and handed it to the king.

He opened it as soon as he received it and scanned its contents. He then closed his eyes and remained silent for a while. His face was filled with shock.

I had to give it to him. The names of the nobles on the list were not one or two. Nearly half the nobles in the entire kingdom had their names on that list.

Even if not all of them were spies, it was safe to say that at least half of them were selling information about the kingdom to the Marquis of Montpellier.

In simpler terms, it could be said with some certainty that at least a quarter of the kingdoms' nobility was firmly on the empire's side.

Suffice it to say, terrible would be too mild a term to describe the feelings felt by a king who had fought against the empire his entire life.

"Why didn't you tell me there was such a list from the beginning?"

I just shrugged at the king's question. He must have wondered why I had fielded such a childish play and gone through all the hassle.

"Would you have believed me?"

I had said that the royal courtier was a spy, and the king had not believed me then. In such a situation, would it have been wise for me to make public that I possessed a list of names of those who dealt with the Marquis of Montpellier?

The king was convinced by my argument and made no further comment.

"I apologize. You have proved that all the deeds that occur in the palace are relayed to the imperial ambassador in one ambitious night. Junbgbaek certainly deserved your suspicions, but it was hard to doubt such an adept royal courtier. It would have been nice if you had waited a little longer to throw the bait so that we could have threaded the needle properly."

I chuckled at the king's lament.

"What did you say to the empire in those days?" I asked him then.

"Because I seemed regretful, they misunderstood. I was told to take responsibility for my actions and withdraw. They must have guessed that as soon as their takeover was completed, I would already be a failed man."

"Let's take it back," I implored him. The king frowned. He seemed surprised that I

would say such a thing. I pressed on, “A nobleman who has long enjoyed power in the capital can seem to fall from grace. He might have lost his power, but he would still have a lot of wealth.”

The king’s eyes shined as if he understood what I was getting at.

“It would be nice, to have their secret plots twisted and aimed back at them.”

“Maybe we can entangle a person with a legitimate grudge. Would they not grasp at the chance to give the enemy of their enemy more power?” I asked him, and thought, for example, the eldest son of the royal family, known as the first prince, or me.

I had already decided to deal with the royal courtier personally. He might be thinking that he would be jailed or exiled to the empire, but I was going to follow through and let him pay the price. And the only price the traitor had to pay was his life.

As I chuckled, the king began to laugh.

Then, he suddenly smiled, but his face soon enough turned awkward. It seemed that he wasn’t used to having such a conversation with me.

The same was true on my account, I also became awkward for no reason, and this motivated me to leave and get on with my business. I was trying to get up quietly, but then the king told me, “The nobles on this list should be thinned out over time.”

“You don’t have to deal with them in haste just because they are so many. Their time will soon come.”

“Their time?” the king asked.

I squeezed my ass, which had been halfway lifted, back into the chair, and I stared at the king.

“Isn’t there something else we need to talk about first?” I asked him.

I was quite relaxed as I looked at the king, but I still so clearly remembered all the soldiers of Winter Castle who had died while awaiting non-existent reinforcements.

The last time I saw my uncle was etched into my mind.

So, I asked, “Why did you abandon the north?”

I wanted to hear the king’s reason for abandoning the north when he could protect it.

# CHAPTER 112
# HOW WILL SPRING COME WITHOUT WINTER'S PASSING? (3)

The king saw his eldest son: An arrogant and energetic young prince.

Prince Adrian reminded the king of himself when he was young. He had thought that he would be able to protect the kingdom from the empire's exploitation and bring about its revival.

He could not, for there was nothing for him to do other than try to hold on. The kingdom had been robbed through many generations under the guise of the treaty, and it had already become a wreck. Massive tariffs were imposed on all transactions that occurred in the kingdom, and the profits from them were directed to the empire. Due to such unscrupulous tariffs, foreign merchants seeking to do business with the kingdom were unable to do so. The kingdom suffered a chronic shortage of supplies due to this.

Mines were established all over the realm by private prospectors, and the trade in the expensive body parts of monsters flourished. The empire had set out to deliberately reduce the power of the royal family and empower the nobles. As a result, the royal family lost all their taxation rights over the nobility, and many private businesses became famous as they grew in power and wealth.

The treasury of the royal family suffered a constant depletion, while the nobility accumulated wealth by extorting the commoners in their lands. The kingdom that had once stood united under the might of the Leonberger family no longer existed. All of that had transpired in the last hundred years.

The twelve legions of the four cardinal directions that support the royal family had also become shades of their past glory. Only four of them maintained their capacity of 2,000 soldiers.

They were the northern Legion of Winter Castle, the eastern legion of the Red Salt Coast Fortress, the southern legion of the Charismatic Citadel, and the Central Legion

in the capital.

The other eight legions were so disorganized that even calling them regular armies was an embarrassment.

In some, almost half the troops up to the majority of them were conscripts who served the nobles and mercenaries who had long-term contracts. And it was in such a state of affairs that the news of troubles in the north arrived.

The king immediately set his mind to the task to dispatch reinforcements. The southern legions on the border, which can be said to be the best armed and armored legions, could not dare to leave the border unprotected. The easter legions, which could swiftly land in the north if they boarded the fleet's vessels, could not move an inch due to imperial pressure.

The Northern Legion was, of course, stationed in Winter Castle, and therefore not a concern. The only dispatchable force that remained was the Central Legion, and despite the relative safety of the royal road, it was no simple choice to deploy this vital line of defense in aid of the north.

Of the tens of thousands of troops of the kingdom, there was no single legion that was not tied down in one way or another.

Eventually, the king readied a portion of the Central Legion and the Templar Knights, despite the enticing power vacuum this would create in the region of the capital. This scant force was strengthened with mercenaries, at considerable cost.

That was the best the king could at the time. He believed that once this force joined up with their up-country counterparts, the shield of the kingdom would hold fast and protect the north.

His supposition proved to be naught but an illusion.

The lords of the north did not deploy their forces, and Winter Castle eventually fell.

Because of this, the north was left exposed and utterly defenseless against the orcish horde.

The northern region had to be reclaimed, but that was a practical impossibility. The royal troops did not number nearly enough to drive out all the orcs, and the nobles of

the center would never deploy their troops if they were to march north.

Thus, a defensive line was formed all along the Rhinethes River, with the forces concentrated at the bridge that spanned it. And only then, when a fire was lit under their feet, did the central nobles allow their troops to be deployed.

Only after hearing that close to 10,000 soldiers had been stationed on the defensive line did the king start to breathe easy. He thought that 10,000 troops could take full advantage of the narrow bridge and so block the orcs from advancing.

Once more, his prediction proved to be mistaken.

The Warlord, the King of the Orcs, almost shattered the defensive line due to his unearthly and incomprehensible presence. The entire kingdom came close to being destroyed by the orcs.

In retrospect, it was no exaggeration to say that the kingdom had been driven to the brink of destruction. It was the eldest son that the king so despised who had humbled him by preventing the kingdom's ruin. His eldest son had turned the tide by attacking the orcs, and his eldest son had rallied the northern troops, newly transformed into a fierce fighting force, to bolster the line of defense moments before it collapsed.

And now this selfsame son was asking him: "Why did you abandon the north?"

The king sighed as he saw the fires of blame rage in Prince Adrian's eyes.

There was so much to say.

As an excuse, he could say that his power had been weakened by the pressure of the empire. He could spread the blame and say that the Balahard family did not properly deploy or control the families under their command.

He could state that the lords of the north had forsaken their responsibilities, or that the central nobles, who dared not cross the river and march north, were not free from blame.

There were many excuses, such as the fact that a monster called the Warlord, that no one had known about, had chosen to invade. He could cite the financial pressures that the treasury faced or a whole slew of other excuses.

Yet, he was not able to let one of them slip from his mouth. For now, he knew that that was all they were: Mere excuses.

The king opened and closed his mouth several times as he looked at the prince. He looked into a sad face with sharp eyes. Suddenly, he realized that the face he was looking at was not unfamiliar.

He remembered that, not so long ago, he had seen that selfsame face.

Before he had ascended to the throne, it was the same face he employed as he had looked at his father, the king. It had been an exact mirror of Adrian's.

The moment that he realized this, the king was able to understand his firstborn son for the first time. All he had to was recall his feelings toward the previous king.

Numerous thoughts flooded into King Lionel's mind as they mixed with his emotions of the past.

Among them, he recognized the self-deception of a father who chose to blame all his ills on a little prince who had not known better. A father who had turned away from reality. He also felt a sense of healing as he saw the monarch he had been: A king who had averted his eyes from successive misjudgments and had dismissed the prince who had saved the realm.

The king closed his eyes as he was swept away in that buffeting tide of endless emotion.

His answer was predetermined; it had been decided from the moment that Adrian had asked the question.

He knew that even if he covered the fruit with the bowl, even if he used excuses to cover up his failings, his eldest son would still stand before him. A son who was doing everything he could to rectify his own mistakes.

The king should have admitted it long ago, but he could not.

As Adrian's sins had been so great, the king had focused on them rather than recognizing his own mistakes. He had been unwilling to re-foster his old feelings and reveal his true heart and had so lost the distinction between public and private.

He had to correct it now.

The king sighed, and with that sigh, he let go of his ego and all his stubborn emotions.

He emptied his heart and emptied himself once more, for doing so only once proved insufficient.

Only then was King Lionel Leonberger able to answer his son's question.

He had tried his best in difficult circumstances, but in the end, all his efforts had failed.

He had tried to respond to the rapidly changing situation but was unable to get the job done properly.

All such failings are the culmination of his sin of being unable to properly lead the nobles as a monarch.

It was the culmination of such staggering incompetence that it was hard to comprehend. He knew all too well that the recent history of the kingdom might sound like one long excuse.

Any royal difficulty which is expounded upon might merely sound like a feckless and dreadful self-rationalization.

The king said all these things to Prince Adrian. And when all his tales had been told, and after much time had passed, the first prince quietly stood from his seat.

There were no words of understanding or criticism.

Instead of eliciting a response, the king just stared at the prince who now stood before him.

It had seemed as if the prince would leave, but he stood still for a while. Then, after some time, he said something unexpected.

"There are five-hundred people who are training to become full knights at Winter Castle."

The king's eyes widened.

"Some of them are known to you."

The prince's statement was too inconceivable to be understood immediately.

"Gwain Gust."

The king had been merely listening to the prince's words, but he now instinctively leapt upright from his seat. Seeing such a reaction, the prince said, "He and his three-hundred comrades are at Winter Castle."

Before the king could say anything, the prince added, "They are still on the level of apprentice knights, but they will soon reach the level of formal knights."

And with that, the prince simply left.

'Choolkuf!'

The king did not allow himself to sit on his throne even after the doors had closed.

A slight whisper, which had escaped from the prince's lips before he had left, now rang through King Lionel's head like rolling thunder.

"I think it's best if Your Majesty accepts their oath this time."

The king was completely lost.

"Gwain and the knights?"

He repeated those words several times.

Suddenly, he sagged onto his throne with a collapsed face.

"Now the empire needs no justification…?"

The king did not know whether he sighed or groaned.

What were Adrian's reasons?

Nothing was clear.

* * *

“We have left the capital, m’lord.”

As Gung Jungbaek heard the coachman’s words, he called the carriage to a halt.

The former royal courtier opened the window and took a moment to appreciate the sight of the sprawling capital. The position of royal courtier, which had been filled by his family from generation to generation, has now ended with him.

It was something he had planned long ago, but now that it had become a reality, he was in a fresh mood.

His mind had felt cluttered these past few days, but now it was cleared.

“I don’t want to play in the big waters anymore, Your Majesty. I seek retirement near a peaceful stream.”

Jungbaek had told the king that the entire affair had discouraged him and that he now wanted to live a quiet life. Of course, he held no such intention. He had already planned his exile in the empire. He had every intention to spend his old age as a nobleman of great power.

To be sure, he hadn’t planned to do this from the beginning.

His family has served the Leonberger royal family from generation to generation, and he had been raised by his father as a faithful servant to the Leonbergers.

It was about four years ago that his thoughts had changed on the matter.

His family had kept double ledgers since time immemorial to ease the taxing labor of keeping the accounts of an entire kingdom. Due to their long devotion to the royal family, they were trusted to calculate the cost of their own services; and being loyal and humble folk, their salaries did not greatly reduce the Leonbergers’ finances.

It was on a normal day that Jungbaek was going through the family ledger. He was thinking of taking a very small sum from the royal treasury due to his unfailing loyalty and years of service.

However, he suddenly became suspicious as to the existence of an incongruity in the records. The sums added up perfectly, and there was no disparity in the ledger where income and expenditure were concerned.

Still, he felt that something was awry.

He straight away took his family's ledger and went to compare its figures with those in the royal ledger.

At first, he thought that someone was fraudulently misappropriating the royal supplies.

The burning desire to close the hole in the royal treasury beset him, and so he secretly pursued the ledger.

Tracking the discrepancy wasn't easy.

He traced the movement of supplies, which had been split into two and then three layers of varying transport companies, sources of supply and distribution, and brokers that brokered on behalf of other brokers.

Invariably, his investigations hit a wall. Still, Jungbaek did not give up as he continued to compare his family's ledger with the royal one, and he traced the shortfall.

After a long year of pursuing them, he finally discovered the final destination of the goods.

His success did not bring him any happiness.

Each person has a secret, and some secrets are so great that others cannot handle them. This case was exactly like that. Surprisingly, the royal family was covertly training three hundred knights.

For Jungbaek, a man who only thought in numbers, the royal secret lay too heavy on his mind and heart. He couldn't stand it. He was afraid that, if he had discovered the royal family's secret, others could do so as well. The royal family knowing that he knew was not the problem. His family had served the Leonbergers for generations, and he would not be dismissed just because he had stumbled onto a royal secret.

The problem was the empire.

Every night he had a nightmare of being kidnapped, tortured, and killed by an imperial agent.

Jungbaek suffered an extreme nervous breakdown until, finally, the lines between nightmare and reality became blurred. It was a struggle for him to keep on living.

So, he decided to go to the imperial ambassador and report his findings.

His honeymoon relationship with the imperial ambassador began on that day.

Jungbaek's sin of reporting the Leonbergers' secret was obfuscated by the foolishness of the first prince.

At first, the royal courtier couldn't sleep because of his guilt. But the state of affairs was already irreversible, and the imperial ambassador continued to demand confidential information from him.

After making a few reports, Jungbaek's guilt started to fade, and then a time came when he felt it no more.

As he thought about the events now, he knew that his choice at the time had been correct. It is far better to live as an imperial nobleman than to spend your entire life playing servant to the Leonberger royal family.

Certainly, his plan hadn't been to flee from the capital through the night like a chased dog, but this was no great problem. He had been promised an imperial title four years ago, and a manor, in exchange for sharing the secrets of the royal family.

All that he had to do now was escape this thrice-damned country and spend the remainder of his splendid life in the empire.

"Well? Move on," he commanded. He had been so wrapped up in thoughts of his rosy future that he had failed to realize that the carriage was not moving.

"Are you there?"

"Yes, m'lord."

"Why aren't we moving yet?"

“The mercenaries m’lord hired haven’t shown up yet… Oh, they’re coming now.”

Upon hearing the coachman’s observation, Gung Jungbaek swung the carriage door open and stepped outside.

He saw a group of riders in the distance, all of them cloaked, approaching through the darkness. Jungbaek forced his lips into a kindly smile. It might be an excessive attitude to display in the greeting of one’s lessers, but in this case, he had to smile.

The riders are his protectors, after all. In fact, they are the special guards hand-picked by the Marquis of Montpellier, knights, and soldiers of the empire.

As he is set to become an imperial nobleman, wouldn’t it be prudent to develop a close relationship with these military men on the journey?

The horses galloped through the dust kicked up by their hooves and finally came to a halt before Jungbaek.

So violent was the halt that Jungbaek was showered with dirt, but he did not so much as cough, let alone show any disgust.

“Are you Sirs Arles and Theorn? Well anyway, you rode hard through the night, and you did well,” the smiling former royal courtier greeted the imperial knights, still smiling broadly. And then, his body stiffened in fear. The face of the man who was now exposed under the torchlight from the carriage belonged neither to Sir Arles, nor to Sir Theorn.

“Is that how you greet me? No matter, I didn’t come here with good intentions,” said the man garbed in a long cloak.

“Well, I… Why is Your Highness here?”

The first prince raised his hood and said, “The ones you are waiting for aren’t coming.”

The moment that Jungbaek heard that, he knew. The imperial ambassador had sold him out.

As soon as this knowledge struck him, he sagged down on the road.

“Your Highness!? Please, don’t chase the little thief just to miss the great thief!”

And then Gung Jungbaek begged desperately, not even realizing that he was swallowing dirt.

“No,” the prince said.

A single scream sounded, and it was not the former courtier’s. Crouching, flinching, Jungbaek summoned and squeezed out a sliver of courage that did not truly exist and managed to open his eyes.

A bloody man was lying on the ground, flat on his face.

Now Jungbaek opened his eyes until they almost popped from their sockets.

The man with the bloodied clothes who was crying in the dirt was the Marquis of Montpellier, ambassador of the empire.

The first prince squatted down until his eyes were level with Jungbaek’s.

“A big thief and a little thief. Which is which?” he mused, and added, “Only the little thief will keep his life.”

Jungbaek understood: Only one man would be spared.

# CHAPTER 113
# HOW WILL SPRING COME WITHOUT WINTER'S PASSING? (4)

When I stated that I would only be sparing the one with the lighter offenses, Gung Jungbaek began to expose all Montpellier's evil deeds. Montpellier merely listened.

However, his patience soon wore thin, and Montpellier decided that he was not about to die without fighting back. So, he began to shed light on the betrayal by the royal courtier.

I enjoyed the absurdity of their ever-greater revelations, gathering information all the while.

"I served my country. You, you are a traitor!" Montpellier spat out.

"Says the one who persecutes the weak, forcing them to comply!" came Jungbaek's retort.

Soon enough, their war of revelations devolved into a scuffle of petty criticisms.

"Here is the guy who cannot even make eye contact, but he still dares wag his tongue!"

"And you, Montpellier!? You dare act all noble even if you do such rotten things!"

As I watched Montpellier and Jungbaek point and shout at each other, I laughed. Their revelations had not forced me to revise my outlook on things that much. I was just relieved that deceiving and desperate men such as they no longer influenced the affairs of the kingdom.

"Your Highness! This scoundrel is the one who had made Your Highness, in all your innocence, an informant for the empire! Montpellier has made Your Highness suffer so many hardships! He deserves to die a hundred, nay, a thousand deaths!"

As the former royal courtier screamed out his accusations of evil, Montpellier became rigid. I was gradually getting bored by all these nasty revelations, but one word flashed through my mind.

“Again.”

As they heard me speak, I saw that Montpellier had become exhausted and pale, while Jungbaek had an elated face.

“Just say that again,” I implored.

“It is exactly as I have said, Your Highness. The Marquis of Montpellier has driven a wedge between Your Highness and His Majesty, causing chaos in the royal family. He planned to disturb Your Highness’s mind at a fundamental level. On a larger level, he wanted to create questions about the legitimacy of the Leonbergers, and bring about great confusion.”

“So you mean that I was not the informant?”

“That’s correct! Your Highness is innocent! Because of my discovery, your innocent Highness was so persecuted-” Jungbaek shut his mouth, looking at me in amazement as he realized what he had just said.

If one baboon sits in a tree, the thing sitting next to it must be a baboon as well.

I laughed; I could not hear such a truth without laughing. The sound of ceaseless laughter flowed from my throat, and tears came to my eyes.

Where else would one see a better skit in this world than here?

After I had worried about it for countless nights, I had finally decided to live with the original sin of the foolish Adrian. And now, the primary motivation of the three-hundred knights who trained day and night, only knowing hatred toward me, has proved to be a baseless lie.

I felt like a clown.

As I continued to laugh and chuckle for the longest of time, Montpellier trembled, pushed himself to his knees, and fell before me.

"…!" He had said something, but I couldn't hear it. I was laughing so much that my ears were ringing, and no sound came to them. And then, I suddenly looked back. The knights who had followed me from Winter Castle were looking at me with anxiety. There was Arwen, Adelia, as well as Carls and his fellow knights. There were also Gwain and his comrades.

I studied Gwain's face, thinking that he especially would appreciate how it feels to be playing a part in this poetic comedy. But he showed no agitation or any emotion. He merely looked at me as if I was far away and indistinct. Not only Gwain but also his comrades looked at me with such consistent faces.

'Slugh,' I swallowed, and the laughter that had so vigorously and unceasingly burst from now subsided, as if it was never there.

"Surely…" I muttered, and at that moment, a great many thoughts flowed through my mind.

I listened as the knights talked and realized who was in those bodies. I realized that Gwain and the others had not been able to hear Jungbaek's words.

"I think he took it too far, dragging the empire's man here."

"I definitely opposed it."

"I don't understand why he's looking at us."

"I'm curious about that too."

As I listened to their idle conversation, it felt as if my brain had become blank.

After looking at them for a while more, I burst into laughter.

"Once again, he laughs!"

This time, I doubled up at the waist as I laughed like a true madman. And I knew something had changed in me, in my very soul.

"Well, it seems like something is wrong in his mind…"

"I think it would be better if we hang back for now."

“I agree.”

“Okay, huh. There is nothing for us to do.”

I heard them speak, and I shook my head, now only smiling. I did not need to tell the knights, and it was better if they did not know. It was only due to their hatred of me that Gwain and his comrades were willing to suffer under younger instructors and roll in the mud with the mercenaries. It was only to gain revenge on me that they had accepted the mana hearts and worked so hard to master them.

What good would it do for such motivated knights to learn the truth?

At best, the fact that they had hated and blamed the wrong person would only increase their self-doubt. At worst, they would lose all their motivation once the poison was wrenched from their hearts.

Until they reached greater glory through the development of their mana hearts, they needed a reason for excelling. They might as well learn the truth later rather than sooner. I touched my still-tingling cheeks, then squatted back down and made eye contact with Jungbaek.

“That was a very interesting story.”

Jungbaek thrust his head to the floor, avoiding eye contact.

“Your Highness! Please have mercy!” Jungbaek shouted. I punched into his jaw, and as blood flowed from his mouth, I made sure that he didn’t lower his head again.

“If you have more interesting stories, you better tell them all,” I said as my extreme anger toward the royal courtier simmered in my breast. Jungbaek’s soul was one that easily broke if it became suppressed. He was a man whose heart could not bear to face overwhelming odds, and so he went out of his way to tell of past events.

Among the stories were many that had no use to anyone, such as his affair with a maid in the royal palace and other gossip related to the royal family.

I listened to all of Gung Jungbaek’s tales as I let him speak. And when I had heard all of his stories, I could not help but decry the absurdity of it all.

That a weak-souled man such as he had damaged the kingdom to such an extent by

selling its secrets as one would sell apples at the market.

He had traced the 'misappropriated' supplies and discovered the existence of Gwain and his comrades, and then sold them out. Recently, it was Jungbaek who told the third prince where my true body lay, where the king had hidden it. It was he who had told the third prince that if I ascended the throne, none of the other princes would be safe. Jungbaek said that he didn't know that the third prince would attack the king's palace and slaughter so many. Still, this changed little. Jungbaek had instigated Gillian's rebellion.

"Hahaha." A burst of vain laughter escaped my lips. This insignificant slip of a man was responsible for the death of so many great knights. He was the reason that a prince of the kingdom was slain as a traitor.

It was all so incredible.

Gung Jungbaek talked on and on for such a long time, and he was honest. At last, he told me things of an extremely personal nature and why he was not truly at fault for his actions.

I drew Twilight and sliced into the man's shoulder. He spasmed like a lunatic as his eyes rolled in their sockets, staring at his severed arm. I brought my blade to bear again and amputated the remaining arm of the last royal courtier.

Only then did he scream.

"Ooauh! Aah!!? Agh!"

I stood silently, waiting for his screams to subside. He had briefly fainted from the pain, and as he snapped awake, he saw only me.

"Your Highness! Please spare me!"

And as he looked at me, I slowly drew my blade back, making sure that he knew that death was approaching, making sure that he dreaded his end.

"Highness! Please, only my life… stop the bleeding."

I sliced through his throat like one would slice the throat of an animal. Even if he wanted to stem the flow of blood, he had no arms to do so.

I turned my head away from Jungbaek.

“Well, Your Highness,” the terrified Marquis of Montpellier said as he fell flat on his face.

I brought the bloody Twilight before him.

“Uaagh!” came Montpellier’s bizarre squeal as I wiped the blood from Twilight onto his clothes, onto his face.

“You’re lucky, Montpellier,” I whispered to him as I returned Twilight to its scabbard.

“This time, you were the smaller thief.”

A sour scent wafted over the smell of fresh blood.

“Tchu,” I clucked my tongue as I looked down and saw the spreading dampness in Montpellier’s pants.

“Take care of the corpse. Send the wealth-laden wagon back to the palace.”

“Yes, Your Highness!”

“Also, none of you are ever to mention what has happened here.”

“We will keep silent!”

Pleased by the knights’ answers, I returned to the task at hand. Montpellier was still lying on the spot to which he had sunk.

“Montpellier!”

“Anything! Tell me!”

“You didn’t think it would end like this, did you?”

He merely trembled and then sputtered, “Well, I am grateful for having this chance at life, for being spared! I am grateful to Your Highness!”

I had torn out his throat and given him several other kinds of deaths thousands of

times in my mind. But for the time being, I needed him kept alive, at least until the tower was built and until the north stood ready.

“Visit me at noon today.”

If I saw him for a moment more, I would sever his head and be done with it, so I turned away, not even hearing his answer as I mounted my horse. Arwen and Adelia were not part of the cleanup, so they rode to the left and right of me. As we rode, I suddenly sensed a gaze fall on me. I turned and saw that Arwen was upset by something. She had averted her gaze when I looked at her.

“What’s wrong?” I asked. She hesitated for a while and then said, “Don’t you regret that they don’t know?”

Arwen knew of the existence of the Death Knights and that they occupied the bodies of Gwain and his comrades from time to time. As I looked at her regretful gaze, I made a slight gesture.

It was a simple one, which involved touching one’s thumb to the ring finger and then separating them again, and it was part of the swords-elves’ sign language.

“Your Highness?”

Arwen did not know sign language, so she wanted to know what the gesture meant.

Instead of answering her, I kicked my horse’s flanks and rode on.

* * *

When I returned to the palace, the day was already bright. I washed the blood off me and changed my clothes with Adelia’s help. Then I went straight to the king.

“Your Highness.”

“Tell him.”

The palace knight nodded and announced my arrival to the king.

“Your Majesty, His Highness the First Prince has arrived.”

“Enter.”

I entered the king’s rooms. He stood with his back to me, his eyes not shifting from where they gazed out of the window. I didn’t say anything.

I had been away all night, and the king would surely know where I went.

Perhaps he didn’t want to face me because he was ashamed that the royal courtier had turned traitor under his rule, or maybe it would be too burdensome for him to look into my face at that moment.

Either way, it was clear the king’s attitude was not a comfortable one.

“How are they doing?” he finally asked me, not about Jungbaek, but rather his old knights.

“They train day and night to regain the strength they held in the past.”

I could certainly not reveal the fact that their souls differed between night and day.

I told the king that I could have some of them meet him right away if he so desired.

He shook his head; his back still turned to me. It seemed that the time had not yet come for him to face the past. I didn’t make the offer again as I didn’t intend to force the issue.

“If you have anything to say, say it,” the king said after a long silence,

His tone was still harsh, but it had softened to such an extent that it was incomparable with his frigid voice of the past, which had felt like the winds that blew in the middle of winter.

This difference proved brief.

“What do you have to say?” the king demanded as he turned to me.

As I looked at his coldly hardened face, which once more seemed to have taken on the spirit of the north wind, it felt as if winter had once more come between us.

“Say your words, and say them now!”

It was the natural order of things that spring came after winter, but I seemed to have a wintry spirit.

It was so nice to hear and see the king once more batter at my walls so coldly.

“What are you doing here? Where are you going to go from here?”

The king was different from me in so many ways.

# CHAPTER 114
# IT WAS SAID THAT THE JIFIJI TEMPLE WAS COMPLETELY BURNED (1)

The relationship between the king and me was obviously bad.

He had not hidden his hatred and contempt of me from our very first meeting, and since then, he has maintained that attitude. He was always eager to berate me, and whenever we met, we continually growled at each other. I could barely count the times on my hand when we had faced each other and not argued.

Even taking our past relationship into account, the current anger of the king was on a level I had never encountered before.

“It’s not sane! You can’t think of doing such things unless you are completely crazy.”

The king had gone as far as treat me like a madman.

I could understand it.

“If you’re not crazy, then you must be an enemy of the kingdom for wanting to go to the empire!”

In the current situation, where I had recently been granted the right to succeed to the throne, me saying that I wanted to go to the empire must surely sound like crazy bullshit to the king.

He roared and spewed out his anger for a long time after that.

In the past, I would have already become angry with the king at this point and shoved my own barbed remarks into the conversation. I couldn’t do so now.

It was because I knew that the king’s anger did not stem from a hatred of me as before; no, his current frustrated yelling was rather because he was anxious about my safety.

And somehow, this tickled my heart. The feeling was awkward and quite uncomfortable.

If things had been as they were in the past, the king would have readily accepted my ploy by saying: “Go to the empire! We don’t need a useless idiot here.”

Instead, the king now seemed exhausted and sapped of his anger as he said in a cracked voice, “You will do it, and you won’t listen to me.”

“We need to know our enemies to prepare for the future,” I said without backing down.

“If all you want is to learn of the empire, you can do that without leaving the kingdom,” the king said, adding that he would allow me to read all the information he has gathered through the years.

“I have to see it with my own eyes.”

“If you truly wish to do that, then you will have to offer up everything that has been given to you, first,” the king said as he stared daggers at me. He stated that I had to give up all the concessions I enjoy as a prince.

That would not be difficult; in the first place, it was mostly empty pleasures in the capital that I had to give up. All my knights were loyal to me, not to the royal family, so the king did not have much that he could take from me.

He also seemed to realize this a second later.

“I will also need to reclaim the Dragon Slayer,” the king said, threatening to take my true body.

“It is a reward I received in return for completing your quest. There exist no valid grounds to take it from me.”

“And what if someone manages to take it from you? There are set precedents for the safekeeping of royal artifacts.”

“You offered it to me, and I received it. It’s already mine,” I retorted, refuting the flimsy premise of past cases where boons that had been granted were retracted. A childish argument broke out and lasted for a while. The king barely managed to hold

his anger in check, and then it exploded from him.

“What is the reason for you traveling so far, to the empire!?”

“There are things that I cannot know without seeing them with my own eyes,” I said as I faced the king’s wroth, keeping my answer consistent.

I had not known the kingdom properly either, so I had gone through countless trials and committed many errors for two whole years. Only then was I able to grasp the reality of the kingdom and fill my knowledge gap of four centuries of history to some extent.

On that journey, I had lost my uncle and so many others. I was not willing to make the same mistake twice. And to prevent that, I have to witness the reality of the empire with my own pair of eyes.

I had to understand how the current empire differed from the empire of four-hundred years ago. I had to know to what extent the current emperor and his knights differed from their forebears.

Never again did I want to lose someone close to me due to absurd ignorance and arrogance.

“You are the eldest prince of the kingdom. Wherever you travel, you will encounter those who despise the kingdom, and you will be faced with a bottomless contempt from them,” the king told me. His voice was weaker than before. It seemed that he had finally admitted to himself that he could not break through my stubbornness.

“Is that any different from how I am treated here?” I asked the king. I told him that I had already lived such a life in the kingdom.

“The nobles of the empire will not hesitate to insult you to your face.”

“If I return the insult, then all will be fine.”

“There may be many who will want to do you harm.”

“If they want to, they can try.”

“I don’t understand this. I can’t understand why you’re going to walk on a path of

thorns, why you wish to invite such suffering into your life."

"To avoid greater suffering."

The king locked his eyes with mine, and I did not avoid that gaze. He stared in that manner at me for a long time and then sighed.

"You will have to renounce everything that you are entitled to. You will not be heading into the empire as a prince, not as heir to the throne."

This meant that I was to be deprived of my right of succession to the throne, which has been confirmed in the recent past. I would have to go to the empire as someone who was of the royal family, and nothing more.

After long arguments on the matter, I finally made up my mind.

"I will do so," I said as I accepted the king's conditions with some embarrassment.

An unpleasant look came into the king's eyes. He was not satisfied that my stubbornness had held out to the very end.

"When you turn eighteen, you will have your coming-of-age ceremony."

The king was silent for a while, then said, "On that day, you will regain all your rights."

I laughed then, for the king's words sounded like a plea that I return safely from the empire before I turned eighteen. As he had already deprived me of my right of succession, he needed to lure me back somehow. He had thrown out his bait and hoped that it would be enough for me to bite into.

The atmosphere was awkward, and neither the king nor I were used to such a situation. In this case, it was best to avoid talking altogether. Unfortunately, there were still things that had to be discussed. As I struggled to tolerate the awkwardness, I opened my mouth to speak, but the voice of the palace knight interrupted me.

"Your Majesty! The imperial ambassador has arrived!"

The king's cold expression now became glacial, his face hardening like a sheet of ice.

“Why is he here now?”

The king could not grasp at a reason as to why the ambassador would visit in the midst of our upsetting conversation.

“Let me see,” I said as I shook my head upon seeing the king’s surliness, “I called him here.”

“What!?”

“Let him enter!” I commanded the palace knight as I ignored the king’s outburst. The door opened, and Montpellier appeared.

There was not a trace of the ordeal he had suffered during the night. A doctor had obviously tended to his bruises, and he had neatly changed into fresh clothes.

“Your Majesty.”

The king glanced at the Marquis of Montpellier, bent over, and asked me about the circumstances of the visit. Instead of answering, I beckoned to the marquis. It was an innocent gesture; the type of gesture one would use to call over a breeding dog.

The startled marquis glanced at the king and then at me.

“What happened to the great thief?” I asked as if speaking to myself. The marquis screwed his shut as he heard my words, knowing that they were directed at him.

He came to stand before me, said, “Well, Your Highness. You have summoned me,” and then bowed to me from the waist. The king’s eyes were round in shock as he stared alternately at Montpellier and me.

“Tell me of all the great schemes the empire has initiated without the kingdom’s knowledge,” I ordered him. The marquis jerked his head up in shock. His face was pale, and his breathing accelerated: A natural response.

The reason the marquis has been cooperating with me up to this point was that I was a prince who had an extremely bad relationship with the king. If, in the future, Montpellier’s relationship with me became known to the empire, he could say that it was all in aid of installing a puppet king onto the throne. In such a case, it was possible for him to justify his actions.

The king's presence changed everything. To divulge imperial secrets in front of the king was an unpardonable act of treason. It wasn't a thing he could easily do, even if I held him by the leash. He could lose everything if things went wrong. No, in all likelihood, he would lose everything.

In other words, if he followed my order, it meant that he would be gambling his life, and the odds of his survival would be a slim one out of ten.

Under normal circumstances, the marquis would never have followed my order.

"You must be mistaken," he said, then hesitated, and finally took out a sheet of paper from inside his voluminous sleeve. It was a document brimming with secrets available only to the highest ranks of the empire.

"This is not a request," I stated.

Montpellier's face was greatly flushed as he stared at the official seals on the document. I could see his innermost thoughts play out in his mind. He regretted it all.

He regretted that he went to the north and on that day surrendered to me, leaking out all his secrets. He was deeply regretting the fact that he had not guarded his mouth when he was faced with certain death.

Perhaps he thought that the moment I left the capital, he would report all the facts to the imperial mainland and so save his life. Rather than sticking with the small country and fighting against the larger one, he must figure that his highest chance of survival was to throw himself before the emperor's mercy.

However, that would only be possible if he was able to leave the kingdom in one piece.

The swords-elves were monitoring the marquis day and night, and by my order, they would cut him down. I had kidnapped the marquis last night before my rendezvous with Jungbaek, just to show him that I could have him killed any time that I liked. And that I was rather looking forward to the act.

The marquis was no fool. He knew that it was a virtual impossibility for him to escape the capital and survive the ordeal.

And the Marquis of Montpellier that I knew was not a man who would die for his country before betraying it. He was not a political martyr. He was a survivor that would do anything in his power to gain just an extra day of life.

“Speak,” I ordered Montpellier once more.

The marquis closed his eyes tightly. And then, he began to talk about the empire’s secret master plans against the struggling kingdom. His story began at noon, and it continued into the night. He made it clear that I was not the informant who had caused the tragic breaking of the knights four years ago.

“Hahaha haha,” came the king’s bitter laughter as the tale ended. His laugher sounded exactly like mine when I had gone on like a madman the previous night.

I gave the king some time to calm his heart.

“I,” he said after a while, hesitating as he looked at me, “How can I pay for my sins?”

He had believed his eldest son to be in the pocket of the marquis; he had hated and prosecuted him and had finally driven him north.

“How can I correct my mistakes?” the king asked in a subdued voice, asking me what he should do to apologize.

So, I answered him. “Just say that it was a misunderstanding and that you’re sorry.”

That one word would be enough.

“I am sorry. I’m really sorry! I did something that I should never have done to you,” the king apologized.

“I already forgot it all,” came my reply as I accepted his remorse.

It took a long time for the king to regain control over his emotions.

“When did you find out?” he asked me.

“I heard for the first time yesterday.”

“What are you going to say to Gwain and the knights?”

“I will leave things as they are for the time being.”

“Theirs is a resentment and hatred of the innocent. It is right to correct it.”

“I will tell them the truth someday, but now is not the time.”

An indescribable feeling showed itself in the king’s eyes. It was boldness mixed with guilt.

As I looked into those dark eyes, I felt awkward all over again. So, I kicked the little marquis.

“You’ve done a lot of harm so far!” I shouted at him.

“Your Highness, do not kill me for my sins!” he pleaded. He had fallen flat on his face when I had kicked him, and his head had smacked into the floor.

I kicked Montpellier a few more times and then stopped to catch my breath so I could kick him some more, but the king interrupted by asking me, “What are your plans for the future?”

“I will study the dynamics of the empire with my own eyes and bide my time.”

The king pondered this. I felt so overwhelmed by the depths of his eyes that I went back to kicking Montpellier.

“Waaugh!” the marquis screamed as if he would die.

* * *

After I had completed my business with the king, I took the Marquis of Montpellier to the First Palace.

“What is the opinion of me in the empire?”

The marquis was hesitant and couldn’t answer.

“Be honest.”

“Now, they believe Your Highness to be an incompetent prince, a greedy and selfish

little boy."

He had hesitated and then spoken. I laughed at his words. Montpellier continued his report after he had quickly checked my expression.

I was an opportunist who had taken power after the death of my uncle. Or, I was but a puppet prince, my strings being pulled by the northern lords. I was definitely the shame of the Leonbergers, possessing no noble virtues or notable abilities, and I was an avowed enemy of the king.

Even those in the empire believed that my secession to the throne had to be prevented for the sake of a stable political climate in the kingdom.

That, in a nutshell, was the empire's assessment of me.

Everything was as I had hoped it would be. In order to foster such misconceptions, I had consistently ordered Montpellier not to report my true nature to the empire. The marquis had enacted my wishes brilliantly.

But still… why wasn't I feeling good about his report?

"I'm a weakling who can't think for himself? Or am I confused? Am I rather an idiot who will gladly sell out his entire country? No!" I shouted as I kicked the marquis, who had been unaware of my bad mood, all the while spitting out invectives.

The screaming marquis rolled around on the floor, then crawled before me, and, believing my abuse to be unfair, said, "Your Highness told me to be honest."

"You could have summarized it in a modest manner and without insulting me."

The marquis almost protested but then shut his mouth.

As I stared at him, I asked, "If I head into the mainland of the empire, predict the reaction of the imperial nobles and the emperor."

The marquis pretended to think for a while and then said, "Seventy percent of the nobles, including His Imperial Majesty, won't care much. The remaining thirty percent will be more welcoming to Your Highness."

I asked him who the thirty percent were.

“Among them are the nobles of the eastern empire. In summary, they control tens of thousands of the best soldiers.”

The marquis shut his mouth then and looked at me. After some time, he spoke again and told me of those of the highest rank who would try to appease me.

“If it were to be His Highness the Third Princeps and His Highness the Fifth Princeps, they would try to treat with Your Highness.”

I understood the importance of Montpellier’s words immediately.

The fact that there were some of the principes who wanted to be on my good side meant that they were struggling for succession to the throne and that their positions were so disadvantaged that they would even approve of a prince from a small country if he were to join their side.

I asked the marquis about the two principes. He furnished me with a relatively detailed answer.

The same situation counted for both principes: The status of their mothers and their small power-bases meant that support for their succession claims was weak. It was said that the fifth princeps’ side had difficulties in rallying support among the nobles due to the clever and virtuous nature of the third princeps.

“People are reluctant to support them because of their high-bloodedness and harsh language.”

These were words I had heard a lot; they were evaluations that I had encountered multiple times from certain quarters.

“You mean they’re crazy.”

Those who spoke about me used exactly the same language.

“The third princeps is a more attractive prospect than the fifth princeps,” I said, and looked at the marquis who had stopped sulking as he looked at me in amazement, and I added, “because it sounds like I will get along well with him.”

Seeing the face of Montpellier, I smiled.

# CHAPTER 115
# IT WAS SAID THAT THE JIFIJI TEMPLE WAS COMPLETELY BURNED (2)

The marquis was returned to his mansion, and two additional Swords-elves were attached to him. I even told them that it would be okay to reveal themselves if their reconnaissance necessitated it. The marquis had already made his choice when he had gambled his life, but I knew that he was still human. There was a need to strengthen my surveillance in preparation for the day when he might choose to take flight.

I stood before the crystal ball, which was a precious telecommunication artifact that had I had claimed from the marquis. As I rubbed the crystal sphere, a trace amount of mana flowed from my body.

Shortly thereafter, I heard Vincent's voice. "Your Highness."

"Are you free to talk? How are things at Winter Castle?"

"Winter is coming, and thus, we are in the midst of our war preparations."

After we had greeted and shared our regards, it naturally came about that I told Vincent all about what had happened in the capital.

"I can't bear it, to hear about His Highness the Third Prince. And, are you talking about Gung Jungbaek? I saw him a long time ago, and he didn't strike me as the sort of man brave enough to do such a thing."

Vincent sounded regretful when he heard about Gillian's attempted coup and was incensed when I told him of the royal courtier's betrayal.

"Have you ever heard of such a damnable traitor? You have been framed all this time! But why don't you want the truth known? Is that not unfair?"

"No, and I have already thought about it. The chances are that they won't listen

anyway, so tell me, what would you do? I keep the secret close to my breast for now."

When I told Vincent about the truth of what had happened four years ago, his anger blazed. When I further stated that I had no intention of revealing the truth, I was stunned by Vincent's temper at my decision. Still, he finally gave up and told me that I could do whatever I want.

"So, I will travel far away for a time," I told Vincent, telling him further that I had a job to do in the empire.

"Are you sane!? Do you know where you are going? Don't be mistaken and think that it'll be like visiting someone in the next neighborhood."

Vincent was greatly surprised, and his response so exactly mirrored what the king had told me. Vincent's emotions were the same as the king's as well.

However, his feelings were not at all burdensome, nor did they feel uncomfortable. I chuckled and laughed, and Vincent turned even more enraged as he screamed, "All work is done here! And now you go to the empire? That country?"

"Ophelia will take care of the dwarves and their work. Vincent, make sure you keep control of the nobles and find the most usable candidates from among the noble son's to-"

"So, now you're telling me that I have to go to war without you. That I have to chase after the children of southern nobles, and that I have to do all the thing that Your Highness should have done!"

"Isn't war what the Balahards have always been good at?"

"If a man dies on the battlefield, he dies with honor! Your Highness will be behind the enemy lines and probably die at your own desk! I'm already struggling to prepare for the war, so now I must take care of Your Highness's work as well?"

"No! How much trouble do you think my work will be, Vincent? The tower will basically be just the dwarves and the wizard poking around until it stands, and when the dwarves move out, it's done with. The Count of Balahard, you, must merely oversee the setting up of the tower on your lands and the settling in of your new neighbors, right? If the noble sons are arrogant and back-chat you or the rangers, you can just laugh at the cute little guys. They'll fall in line soon enough."

I closed my mouth. I had nothing more to say. Vincent had been listening to me for a long time and had grown tired of arguing, so he asked, “So when are you going to go?”

“I’m finishing up some business in the capital for a few days. I’m thinking of heading straight from here after that.”

“When will you come back?

“I will return before my coming of age ceremony, when I turn eighteen.”

“If you are late, won’t the tower and all the other projects fail?” Vincent asked, and his words forced me into a laugh.

“Oh yeah,” I said, “send me one ranger platoon. I will need them.”

“I can send Jordan and his guys.”

“Would they like that?”

“If they are ordered to go, they’ll be okay. Why would they suddenly act differently?”

I laughed again as I remembered Jordan’s sour face and affronted eyes whenever he was given long-term missions. As I kept laughing, Vincent’s temper flared up again.

“Rather, why are you going to the empire!?”

“You ask me too early.”

“Please answer me.”

“I want to witness the situation in the empire personally.”

“Is that the true answer?”

When he asked that, I suspected that he would start nagging me again, so I hurriedly told him of my plans. I told him that the empire was noisier than usual, with every princeps fielding his right to inherit the throne. Among them were the third and fifth principes, the two most likely to welcome me.

“So, what will your plans be?” Vincent asked.

“I don’t have anything concrete in mind. To make a mess, I’d say.”

“Even if you are the prince of another country, they won’t handle you kindly if you make a mess in the empire.”

“Why do you think I am going there?” I asked Vincent, who did not really understand politics, “The accident is coming to them, not to me.”

* * *

My business in the capital would soon come to an end.

All that remained to be done was to set a schedule and a route for going to the empire. That was easily resolved when the king appointed me as the main representative of the official delegation that would travel to attend the empire’s new year’s event.

I just had to follow along with that delegation, and our journey would soon be over.

Of course, before all that, I had to select those of my knights who would be going to the empire with me.

“Am I going? I will go unconditionally,” came Carls’s answer.

“We’re going to the empire? I have to go and see how good they are, then,” said Gwain.

“I have to pack my things,” Arwen immediately said and then left the room without awaiting my permission. Adelia also quickly disappeared, saying that she had a lot of things to pack if we were to go on such a long journey.

Almost all of my knights had expressed their desire to participate in the expedition. Still, I could not take them all. I could not take such a large force with me, along with enough provisions, especially as I would be the head envoy for what was meant as a peaceful delegation.

After thinking it over, I was able to select my group.

Among them were some of my palace knights, and Carls was chosen as their representative. Arwen and Adelia had been included by default, ad they would follow me to the ends of the earth even if I told them not to.

The three Ekyon brothers, hiding in Gwain and his two comrades, were also included, along with the half-elves Gunn and Geomhee.

And in that manner, I had chosen the knights that would escort me on the mission.

And soon thereafter, it was officially announced that the king had appointed me as the representative of the delegation. I later heard from the Marquis of Bielefeld that there was a lot of talk among the nobles about the choice.

The nobles were not aware that the conflict between the king and me was resolved, so they complained that it was not a good idea for the king to include me in the delegation.

They said that everyone must wait and see; they would be proved right. Of course, their fears were all unfounded.

Firstly, the trip to the empire had been my decision. The position as the representative of the delegation was merely so that I could conduct my visit under the guise of an official event so that the people of the empire would not treat me carelessly.

However, the nobles did not know that my relationship with the king had changed, so they complained that I was being driven out from the kingdom due to our arguments after the war.

I paid no heed to such bullshit rumors. The deeper the feud between the king and me is believed to be, the easier things become for me in the future.

The king looked at things in the same way as me.

“The day will come when the traitors who try to take advantage of the discord between you and me will be greatly surprised.”

“I’m really excited for that day to come,” I had said as we looked at each other and laughed and then awkwardly closed our mouths. The king had then avoided my gaze and coughed as if he had had nothing to say.

Our misunderstanding was resolved, and there was no resentment left, but strangely, there was no way for us to counter the awkwardness that always crept in between us.

“That is what it means to be a royal man,” the Marquis of Bielefeld said when he visited me late one night. He said that most royal men could laugh happily, but not for long.

“Right,” was all I said.

I didn’t have anything more to say, so I simply responded by tilting back my glass.

“Ah, it’s being said that the delegation’s composition has been decided. It seems that the king has found the right man to assist Your Highness.”

When I asked who it was, the marquis made a weird sound and said, “A person who has volunteered by themself.”

“It will be a year-long mission, so who would volunteer for such a journey if they have nothing to gain?”

“They say he volunteered for his own reasons,” the marquis said, and a playful look came into his wrinkled eyes. He didn’t tell me who it was until the end.

“If that’s the end of our talk, why don’t you just go?” I chided him.

“I was about to get up, anyway,” the marquis said as he rose from his seat.

“The next time you come, bring some alcohol,” I told him as he left because he came here to drink my own liquor every day. The Marquis of Bielefeld pretended not to hear me.

* * *

The palace was quiet, yet it was, in truth, noisy.

At first glance, the situation seemed normal, but underneath that peace, the king’s agents were working behind the curtains to cleanse the kingdom of the traitors.

It wasn’t easy, and it would take a long time. The royal family’s power was too

lessened to wipe out the traitors all at once.

Still, the king had promised that he would try to break the power of the traitor nobles as much as possible while I traveled, and he had seemed motivated.

Next to consider was the Marquis of Montpellier. Montpellier seemed to have completely made up his mind ever since I had told him my plans to drive a wedge into the wheel that was the struggle for succession to the imperial throne.

“If things are done according to Your Highness’s will, the relationship between the kingdom and the empire will become different. There is the possibility that the terms of the treaty will be treated as obsolete, as they would be imposed on a kingdom that has become the ally of the emperor. If so, won’t I be recognized as being a player in the peace process?”

I hadn’t thought that far ahead; all I wanted to do was sow confusion in the internal politics of the empire. Montpellier dreamt of a rosy future. His was an illusion, but I had nothing to lose by strengthening it, so I did.

Things went well, but not everything went smoothly.

“What the hell is going on in it?”

No matter how much I held and shook my true body, it would not wake up.

Something was obviously happening inside, but there was no way to know exactly what. I just knew that it was cramped. Not much time remained.

The empire had been seeking my body for a long time, and in such a situation, holding onto it and heading into the empire would be like giving them Dragon Slayer on a silver platter.

So, I was thinking of leaving my body with Maximilian before I left.

The power of the magic sword usually expressed itself by digging into the immoral and corrupted corners of human minds, and Maximilian had no such corners. Even if something lurked within my body and would not leave, I knew with confidence that I could leave it with Maximilian.

* * *

Time passed by quickly. The scheduled time for departure to the empire crept closer.

One day, a week before departure, an elderly nobleman approached me.

Though he was not young, he was a very handsome man who seemed to be very attentive to his appearance, seeing as he was dressed in stylish clothes.

His face was very familiar. It was definitely the first time I had met him, yet it still felt like meeting someone that I knew.

“I should have come to see Your Highness sooner, but I had to finish my work. Now I am finally here, for my work had been slow.”

I wanted to use the power of [Judgment] to see who he was, but he spoke first.

“I am Siorin, from Kirgayen in the east.”

Only when I heard these words did I know why he was so familiar. He was Siorin Kirgayen, Arwen’s father.

“It honors my family that I will be serving Your Highness for a set period of time.”

So, he was the actual head of the delegation whose identity the Marquis of Bielefeld had never revealed to me.

I studied Siorin Kirgayen. His was a cold and impassive appearance, and while one might think him modest, that would be a mistake.

“You look alike,” I said, for him and his daughter did look surprisingly similar.

Siorin did not have a ready answer to my sudden statement. Even his careless attitude to me was the same as his daughter’s.

And then, Arwen appeared.

“Your Highness!”

She seemed in a hurry. Her hair was well-groomed, and as she greeted me, she saw her father.

Siorin's expression when looking at his daughter was expansive. His nostrils widened, his eyebrows twitched, and he flushed rose-red.

It probably wouldn't help me if he had heard some of the rumors surrounding his daughter. The fact that she had become stigmatized due to being my knight must have brought him some displeasure.

I stood from my seat. I didn't wish to see Arwen arguing with her father in my presence, so I thought to be modest.

There was no need.

"My daughter!" Siorin exclaimed as he opened his arms wide toward Arwen. His face, which had been so cold and unmoving before, was now nowhere to be found. He simply couldn't control the love that was overflowing within him; he couldn't help but show it.

"How can I be so heartless that I have not contacted you for two years?"

It was at that moment that I understood why Siorin Kiragayen had volunteered for a mission into the empire when no one else had volunteered.

After I had stood up in a hurry, I looked at Arwen and Siorin.

No matter how long he stood there waiting, Arwen did not take a step forward to hug her father. So, Siorin stepped forward, arms still wide open, intending to embrace his daughter.

Arwen saw her father doing this.

"His Highness is watching! Keep your posture in check."

I hated it. With all my heart, I hated the awkwardness of the situation, almost so much that I wanted to die.

# CHAPTER 116
# IT WAS SAID THAT THE JIFIJI TEMPLE WAS COMPLETELY BURNED (3)

Arwen, who finally calmed down her father and his attempted hugs, asked me for my understanding, and whether she could talk with him for a while.

I said she could, so she led her father into an adjoining room. Siorin's smiling face not once showed the reality of the situation: That he was being dragged from my presence.

From outside the closed door, I began to hear the scolding voice of a woman.

"Why did you travel so far from home!?"

"I have been summoned here by His Majesty."

"Don't lie! I know you volunteered for this."

"Ah well, a daughter does know her father best."

"Did you say anything strange to His Highness?"

"I said nothing! Do I look like a peasant, who doesn't know proper conduct when meeting a royal?"

"There are rumors regarding my record of service, so I had to ask."

"Why are you so irritable, Arwen? Is there really something your dad doesn't know about you?"

I could hear that Arwen's voice had already become exhausted from all the shouting. Siorin Kirgayen clung to his love of his daughter, struggling through her wild remonstrance of him.

Arwen asked her father to go back home several times, but Soirin had stood firm and said that he wouldn't be beaten back by her. In the end, Arwen had no choice but to relent.

"Please promise me one thing. If so, I will no longer interfere with father's choice to be present on this mission."

"How presumptuous, to have a daughter involved in her father's affairs-"

"I am a knight of His Highness and represent the Kirgayen family in such a capacity. Be mindful of that fact."

Siorin finally got in a word edgewise before Arwen cut him off, and he said, "I promise that I will do nothing to embarrass you in public, Arwen dear."

"I am part of His Highness's knight escort, so do not forget that I am always on duty, regardless of the time and place."

"But Arwen, your father has volunteered only to see you after such a long time! How can you be so hard? If you really love your father, can't we have some time to converse, even if only for a moment?"

"There is no time."

"I really don't believe that you don't have-"

"Not even a second's time."

Even to me, who listened outside the door, Arwen's answer felt like a knife through the heart.

"I'll do as you say, then. Still, it's good to even have the pleasure of seeing your face, and I am happy to see that you are healthy."

Siorin's voice had grown subdued. Its tone had become lonely; it sounded like the leaves of autumn being swept away by a gentle wind.

"I am glad to see you as well, father. I am not so good at these things, but I am glad that you also are in good shape and appear healthy," came Arwen's voice, and her voice had softened as it stuttered, expressing her joy of the reunion as well.

“Thank you for saying that, Arwen. I know you don’t like me that much, so there’s no need to try so hard. I will try to avoid getting in the way of your duties as much as possible during the mission.”

At that point, I didn’t know what to think. Siorin Kirgayen was deliberately showing his weaker side to his daughter.

“It’s not like that!” came Arwen’s response. “I have never thought of father in such a way. You have led us Kirgayens wonderfully, and I have always admired you. The reason I was so ferocious toward father just now is that you have always treated me like your little daughter rather than the knight that I-“

Arwen was interrupted by her father, who said, “I respect that. Come on then, if you let me hug you, I know that you are mature.”

“Father…” said Arwen, and she sounded frustrated as if she tried burying her head into her collar in shame at the moment that her father claimed his hug.

“Father, please let go of me now…”

“My daughter, little bird! Oh, ah, I can say that I want to be holding you like this for years! Your father is dreaming!”

The dream didn’t last long. As Siorin almost started shouting in an excited, love-filled voice, I heard a disgruntled grunt from Arwen as she finally managed to push her father away from her.

“You did that on purpose! Again!” she scolded him.

“Your father’s heart is always the same when I see you. So it is always with my heart that I speak to you. It’s really not intentional.”

It seemed that this situation wasn’t something that had only occurred once or twice. I heard Arwen chiding her father a bit more, and then things grew quiet. The door opened.

“Thanks to Your Highness’s consideration, I was able to communicate openly with my daughter. I can only thank you, and thank you again,” Siorin brazenly stated, his face filled with satisfaction.

Arwen was very red in her face, and I couldn't tell whether it was because she was angry or embarrassed by how her father conducted himself.

On my part, I was just amazed that she had such color on her usually expressionless face.

Arwen briefly thanked me, apologized, and then disappeared.

Once more, I was left alone with Sirion Kirgayen.

His face was frigid and stern, just as it had been when we had first met.

What was his angle? After showing all that love toward Arwen, he was now pretending to be strict once more. I gave a vain little chuckle, finding it all to be so ridiculous.

Whether he noticed my ridicule or not, Siorin said a few words about his planned schedule and then brazenly left me.

"That's a weird guy," I mused to myself as I shook my head, looking in the direction in which Siorin had made his departure.

Soon after Siorin had left, the Marquis of Bielefeld came.

"I saw Count Kirgayen on the way here."

"Yes. It seems as if he'll be going with me."

The marquis took a bottle of wine from my liquor cabinet as if he owned the place and then asked me what my first impression of the count was.

"He loves his daughter a great deal."

The marquis grinned and said that, apart from an excessive affection toward his eldest daughter, Sirion had other virtues and that his skill was beyond doubt.

The Marquis of Bielefeld told me a decent amount of stories while he drank his wine, but his face suddenly turned serious.

"There will be thorns wherever you try to reach, and not one person Your Highness

meets will not test your patience."

The warning of the marquis wasn't much different from the one that the king had given me. So, I would give him the same answer.

"I have lived no differently in the kingdom."

"Your Highness, please pay attention."

"What already?"

"You must leave the capital early on the day of departure, as there is something that has been directly ordered by His Majesty."

As I studied the marquis's expression, it was clear that his covert advice was serious.

"I don't know what's going on, but I hope it ends well," I said.

"I hope that Your Highness will also accomplish your purpose and that we may see each other in safety once more."

I offered a toast to the Marquis of Bielefeld, and he accepted it by saying, "I wish for the infinite glory and well-being of Your Highness the Prince."

"And so do I wish you a pleasant future, Marquis Bielefeld."

We struck our glasses together and emptied them at once.

"Well then," the marquis said, and he left without a backward glance.

So, after having planned my departure for a few days, it seemed that I was tied to it. I felt sorry for the marquis, for he could be comfortably resting at his estate for at his age. Instead, he was wandering around, doing what he could for the sake of the kingdom.

The brightness of the next day was almost terrifying.

I found Maximilian and told him, "Take my sword."

He did not refuse, and I immediately handed him my true body. I carefully watched

Maximilian's reaction. I was wondering whether he would be able to talk to his brother, but it seemed that the guy's soul was still hiding somewhere, in silence.

I intended to watch Maximilian for a few days, so I had entrusted my body to him in advance. I asked him to notify me the instant that he started hearing strange words or voices.

Contrary to my worries, Maximilian did not hear anyone speak, and the day of departure arrived.

* * *

On the day that I left the capital, the king and queen saw me off in front of the palace.

The king opened and closed his mouth, clearly not knowing what to say.

"Go well," he finally said in the end.

Looking at the king, and then at me, the queen asked if I didn't want to give my father a hug.

I hated the thought of it, and the king hated it as well.

"Brother, please go safely," said Maximilian.

"I will, and I shall return and see you again."

After greeting Maximilian, I looked to his side. The princes and princesses that I had met once in the hall were arrayed there.

I bowed my head in silence and waved at them. I looked at Siorin Kirgayen, who asked, "Then, shall we set off?"

"Let's go."

"March!" and at the command of their leader, five-hundred troops began marching along the capital's southern boulevard. Soon thereafter, the Templar Knights joined up with us.

The man who led the fifty knights was one I knew well. He was Erhim Kiringer, the

deputy-commander of the Templar Knights, a man I had fought alongside with at Winter Castle.

“My lord, I am very pleased to see you again,” he said. He and the other Templars knelt before me in reverence. As I saw that excessive display of politeness, Erhim said with a grin, “When we last met, I said the Templar Knights would stand behind Your Highness.”

“Is that so?” I mused.

“Yeah, I said it,” Erhim Kiringer stated as he gave me a meaningful look.

It was a look filled with absolute trust and respect. The Templars who were behind him also looked at me with similar emotions. These were the Templars who had suffered great adversity in Winter Castle, and Dunham Fahrenheit was among them.

Erhim and Siorin walked with me, and the entire party set off again. By the time we had finally left the capital, Niccolo and the rangers came from afar and joined up with us.

“Your Highness,” Ranger Jordan greeted me as I looked down on him, and his mouth was grimly set, his eyes almost popping from their sockets in irritation. It seemed that he was quite dissatisfied after being recruited for another long-term mission.

There seemed to be a whole lot of things that Jordan dearly wanted to say to me, but because the difference between the command and the common soldiery wasn’t as hazy here as it was at Winter Castle, he dared not voice his complaints to me. He just kept looking at me in silent protest with those bulging eyes of his. After the rangers joined us, marching behind the Templars, the number of people on our expedition was nearly six-hundred.

Among them were the three-hundred cavalrymen of the Central Legion. They were our escorts and accompanied us as we headed to the southern border. We finally arrived at the fortress of Eunsaja, which served as the base for the Southern Legion. After we had stayed there for two days, we were well-rested and once more headed south.

As we left the citadel, Siorin said to me with some fear in his voice, “Your Highness, from now on, you must travel by carriage.”

To avoid unnecessary disputes and not show my face too much as we crossed the border, I accented and climbed into the cramped carriage.

“Your Highness, please sleep without worry,” Adelia said as she skillfully arranged the carriage’s cushions and laid me down. As we lay there, I started to enjoy the regular swaying of the carriage. I fell asleep without realizing it.

When I awoke, the procession had stopped.

“Adelia?

“Yes, Your Highness?” she muttered as she rubbed her eyes and raised herself up. I asked her why the carriage had stopped.

“We have reached the borderline, but the imperial troops that have to meet up with us have not yet appeared.”

Upon hearing that, I gave a bloody laugh. Their intention was strikingly clear.

“They mean to insult us by being very late.”

They were loudly announcing their contempt for us by being deliberately late. I figured that it wasn’t that big a deal, so I laid back down. As expected, the imperial troops only showed up late the next day. I raised the shutters of the carriage as I watched them appear. I gave a bitter laugh as I saw a group of horsemen approach, casually steering their mounts our way and not one of them showing any sign of being troubled by their lateness.

“Your Highness, I will close the window,” Siorin said as he appeared and blocked my view.

The window closed, and I heard Erhim Kiringer’s rushed instructions to his knights, “If you have no confidence in managing your facial expression, then lower your visor! From this moment on, don’t even speak a word!”

Shortly after Erhim had spoken, I listened as the once-distant sound of horse hooves came to the fore.

* * *

“Are you Leonberg’s delegation?” the man who rode at the forefront asked in Supreme Imperial, the language of the empire, as he came to a halt.

Despite the man not apologizing for being an entire day late, Siorin Kirgayen didn’t so much as shift an eyebrow. He just inquired as to the rider’s rank in fluent imperial language.

“You know how to speak in imperial,” the rider said, “It is nice to meet you. I am a member of the forty-first army of the empire and advanced knight of the hundred-and-twelfth knights, De Gaulle de Devich.

De Gaulle then asked again, “This procession is the delegation from Leonberg, yes?”

“Yes.”

“Ah! Then, there must be a prince of the kingdom in that carriage, yes?”

Siorin’s face hardened due to the undisguised tone of malice in De Gaulle’s voice.

“I have to say hello to him,” the imperial knight added.

It was expected.

“He has just now fallen asleep because he hasn’t been able to overcome the hardships of traveling in the carriage for an entire day,” came Siorin’s firm response, and I could hear that the Templars had surrounded my carriage in a tight formation.

“Hoh, calm down. I just wanted to greet him, because he is such a precious person who has come,” De Gaulle said, still sounding insistent that he wanted to see the prince’s face.

“I do not know what the custom is in your home country, but in our kingdom, a lower-ranked person can not demand one of a higher rank to greet him, unless the latter desires the meeting,” came Siorin’s response.

“Ah, that is our custom as well – still, I want to see him,” came De Gaulle’s blatant provocation, but before Siorin could act decisively, the carriage door swung open.

Siorin frowned, as he himself fumed inside, and knew Prince Adrian’s reputation for great anger.

He expected the prince to be angry, but such proved not to be the case.

The face of the first prince was very casual as he appeared from the carriage. So far from anger, there was not even a hint of annoyance to be seen.

That alone was unexpected.

“You want to say hello?” fluent imperial language flowed from the first prince’s mouth.

De Gaulle widened his eyes, clearly not having expected that the prince could speak imperial. However, he quickly righted himself and replied with a mean smile, “If you would allow me to say hello, then yes.”

The Templars almost had seizures as they saw De Gaulle approaching the prince while still mounted on his horse. The first prince raised his hand to hold them back, an order which proved to be difficult for them to obey. The sound of teeth grinding behind their visors was heard.

De Gaulle laughed as he steered his horse, obviously hearing the sounds of the Templars’ agitation. He finally came to face the first prince.

And that moment, De Gaulle’s horse suddenly reared its front legs and stepped back from the prince.

“Hey, hey!” De Gaulle shouted at it, terror in his voice at his suddenly willful horse.

“Stop!” the knight shouted, but all for naught, for he could not hold on and was thrown from his mount.

He laid on the ground for a time and then seemed to snap awake as he pushed himself up onto his knees with both hands.

“Huh,” De Gaulle moaned as he shook his head a few times.

The first prince looked down upon De Gaulle with a proud face and said, “Your greeting is well received.”

The imperial knight could only vacantly stare in front of him as he heard the prince’s words.

# CHAPTER 117
# AS IT IS KNOWN, LIKE A FRENZY (1)

The posture of the imperial knight, half-prone and with both hands on the ground, looked like that of a man in devout worship. Siorin's expression was smug as he looked at the knight.

Repressed laughter flowed through the Templars as they pressed their hands to their helmets. Even though they couldn't understand the words that had been spoken, they seemed to have roughly grasped the nature of the situation.

"Nice to meet you too," the first prince said to the blank-faced De Gaulle, "polite imperial knight."

De Gaulle's face crumpled. He got up and opened his mouth, but before he could say anything, the first prince brushed the dirt from the imperial knight's shoulder with a compassionate look.

'Duk, duk," he tapped De Gaulle's shoulder in a comradely fashion and climbed back into his carriage.

De Gaulle was perplexed and unsure as to how to respond, so all he did was stare at the first prince's back. The knights of the kingdom looked at him with mockery in their eyes.

De Gaulle, red face and all, returned to the spot where the other imperial knights had halted.

"Go get it," he ordered, sending one of his subordinates to go and catch the horse which had thrown him and bolted away.

It wasn't long before the imperial knight caught the horse and led it back to De Gaulle.

De Gaulle drew his sword in a lightning-fast motion and glanced at the carriage.

‘Heeeuheeungheeu!’ came the sad sounds of the dying horse after the sword bit into its jugular, the beast spasming as it sank to the ground. Siorin Kirgayen cleared his thoughts as he took in the grisly spectacle. The man was an advanced knight, which meant he was not low-ranked, but his rank was surely no high enough to blatantly commit the affront of being late to meet an official foreign delegation.

Nevertheless, De Gaulle had shown no sign of regret or concern about his laxity, which could be interpreted as a sign that the person who had sent him had intended the situation. It seemed that someone had wanted to break the momentum of the delegation to some extent, and Siorin saw this as a relatively reliable sign as to how difficult the road into and out of the empire would in the coming year.

Nevertheless, Siorin Kirgayen couldn’t help smiling a little.

The members of the delegation were meant to feel insulted by the rudeness of the imperial knights and so be in low spirits, but instead, they now felt bolstered after De Gaulle’s humiliation.

And all of it was thanks to the first prince.

Siorin didn’t know how the hell the prince did it, but everyone knew that he had done something to De Gaulle’s horse.

And thanks to that, the brash knight who showed no respect for those from another country had become the polite knight who had bowed down and worshiped a foreign prince.

That blank face that had looked up at the prince had been the funniest sight of all.

Siorin once more tried to prevent the smile from creeping into his lips. Prince Adrian was a lot different from what he had heard. About five days before leaving the capital, the Marquis of Bielefeld had caught up to Siorin and pulled him into a corner, expressing his concern at the fiery nature of the first prince. He said that the biggest flaw of the prince was that he walks straight, but his steps are too radical, and he always aims to drive the opposing party into a corner. He predicted that the prince would cause undue trouble.

The marquis had been half-right and half-wrong, Siorin mused.

As the marquis had said, the first prince clearly possessed a fiery soul. Otherwise,

there would have been no way that he would have faced such a childish provocation as that from De Gaulle.

But the first prince did not only possess a fiery spirit; no, he also had an insidious craftiness, a certain clever coolness. The process of transforming the rude knight into one of supreme politeness had occurred as natural as flowing water. If the horse had not thrown the knight, it would not have been possible to cleanly crush the imperial provocation and so raise the morale of the delegation. The mission of the imperial envoy, in the form of De Gaulle, to insult the envoys of Leonberg, has failed, as the knight had tried to bite off more than he could chew.

“We have already spent a day stuck in the wilderness. Order the ranks and hasten to prepare for departure,” Siorin ordered. The imperial knights who had failed to arrive at the appointed time had been rebuked, so the kingdom’s troops rushed more than they would usually.

“Hmmm!” De Gaulle scoffed, and he looked quite discomfited by the blatant mockery the imperial soldiers were throwing his way.

“Your Highness, our mission is done,” said a knight of the Southern Legion who had escorted the delegation to the border, and he continued to speak into the carriage, “I hope Your Highness will return safely after finishing your travels.”

When the knight had first met the first prince, he had politely expressed his courtesy, but now, as he said goodbye, he did so with all sincerity.

“Good work. I’ll come back, and I will see you, fine men, again,” the first prince said as he raised the shutter, praising the knights and soldiers of the Southern legion with such a plain greeting.

The knights of the Southern Legion, lined up to either side of the carriage, drew their swords and shouted, “May there be only fortune in the future of His Highness the First Prince!”

“May fortune walk with him!” the soldiers shouted after the knights, and then all of them exclaimed, “We shall keep our fangs sharp and our eyes open until the day of your return!”

The southern knights and soldiers beat upon their breastplates, upon their beloved base of Eunaja Fortress, and once more prayed for the prince’s future.

“Under the order of De Gaulle de Devich, an affiliate of the forty-first imperial army, and advanced knight of the one-hundred-and-twelfth knights, we hereby take over your duty as escorts to His Highness the First Prince. You are free to depart the border,” an imperial knight said, his attitude toward the southerners quite rude.

The southerners didn’t care and stayed with the delegation till the end. They raised their swords and did not move an inch until the prince and his procession disappeared from sight.

* * *

Siorin Kirgayen made sure to inform everyone that they had to hurry as much as possible, but due to the lateness of De Gaulle and his knights, the delegation had to bed in the wilderness again.

After he had confirmed that Erhim Kiringer and the Templar Knights were skillfully making the preparations for camp, Siorin went to Arwen.

“I am here as a public service, on official duty,” he told his daughter.

“Speak,” came Arwen’s response.

“What kind of person is he?”

“Please clarify the question.”

“It is exactly as I ask. After seeing His Highness’s true face today, I think I will need to know His Highness more closely if I am to serve his best interests in the future,” said Siorin, and Arwen nodded, saying that she understood. Her face became contemplative, and then she started talking.

Siorin had just asked what kind of character the prince had, but Arwen now enthusiastically told the story as she recalled the first prince’s actions.

Her face was a reminiscent one, a face that Siorin had rarely seen on his daughter, which made him so excited that he had to close his eyes several times just to make sure that he saw correctly.

Siorin almost cried out in amazement several times as Arwen continued her story but managed to sternly repress such a show of emotion. He was there to perform his

official duty. It was no time to be baring his personal feelings. He marshaled himself as he pressed back the emotions boiling and welling up inside of him.

Siorin continued to listen to his daughter, and at some point, forgot all about his emotions as he became engrossed in the story.

He learned of the journey of the prince, a young man reviled by everyone, as he started to grow up in the harsh lands of the north. And as he heard how Prince Adrian finally stood tall as the leader of the north, Siorin realized that it was not a tale that could be heard without the shedding of tears. If the person telling the story to Siorin had not been his knowledgeable daughter, who was incapable of lying, he would have dismissed the saga as being filled with empty fabrications.

He was surprised by the descriptions of the prince's actions as they flowed from his daughter's mouth. He liked it. It sounded like the heroic stories of old.

"So he is a hero who has faced many troubles?"

"If someone asks me who the hero of the story is, I will tell them that it's the first prince, without a moment's hesitation," Arwen said, expressing sympathy with her father's words.

Siorin fell into deep thought.

He recalled the tale of the fight between the first prince and the Warlord as his daughter had told it. When the Warlord had marched from his lair with legions of orcs, he had sundered the flag of Balahard, which had flown proudly upon its spire. The first prince had then taken the Warlord's banner in hand and exclaimed that he had gained a legendary piece of loot before even fighting, and this had encouraged the soldiers and boosted their morale.

The act of circumventing the enemy's intentions and twisting them back upon him by obscuring the provocation and so bolstering the morale of his allies was exactly what the prince had done when he had humiliated De Gaulle today.

Siorin judged that the first prince was adept at fighting the foe on a psychological level and was experienced in how to reverse the atmosphere in his favor.

An unwitting smile crept onto Siorin's face.

The lump of luggage he had thought he had to protect and care for turned out not to be luggage at all.

As Siorin realized this, he drastically started revising his plans for the future.

“By the way, your voice sounds different whenever you think and talk about His Highness.”

“I’m just telling you how he is, so don’t be miserable or get fooled by how I sound. There was never such a relationship between us,” Arwen said, as she dismissed the thought of having an affair as a woman with such a man, as she was serving as his sworn knight.

Siorin, though, could see how much his daughter admired the knightly prince.

He knew it and did not doubt it.

It made him strangely sad. It felt as if something precious had been stolen from him. As he recalled his daughter’s face as she so excitedly spoke of another man, Siorin started crying again. Arwen saw his face and stepped back with disgust.

“Hmm,” Siorin belatedly corrected his expression, and when his face was serious once more, he said, “I just hope that His Highness’s will remain unbroken to the end.”

“I do not know of anyone who can break his will,” Arwen said, and then quickly raised her guard and added, “I’ll bet you’ll be surprised a great many times by his Highness, more times than you can think off.”

“I’m looking forward to it.”

Even so, Siorin took Arwen’s word with a pinch of salt. He figured that they were just an outpouring of her pride toward the person that she served.

He was wrong.

His daughter’s words had not been a prideful exaggeration; they were an accurate representation of reality itself. Not long thereafter, Siorin was among those invited to a legion commander’s welcome banquet at an imperial border fortress, where they had arrived the following day.

“Hahaha! I don’t understand how they say the nobles of the kingdom are rude and bombastic with such an unexciting prince! Hah, if you were born here in the empire, you would possess the spirit to lead at least a single legion!”

The first prince remained calm as he heard the legion commander so easily dismissing the successor to the throne of another country; the future king of that country.

By that time, Siorin had gained complete confidence in the first prince’s patience and discernment. He should not have made such a premature judgment.

“The knights of the kingdom and the empire have tested themselves by clashing their swords since ancient times. It is a pity that now we don’t war with each other, so the swords of the imperial knights begin to rust, and their battle-thirst wanes,” the first prince stated.

The legion commander was quite drunk, and therefore would not shut up when it would have been wise to do so.

“If Your Highness permits me, I would like to use this chance so that we can enjoy our fellowship through the sword. So that we can become the whetstones that will sharpen each other, as was the case in the past, as you say. What do you think?”

The calm and pragmatic appearance of the first prince a day before was so deeply etched into Siorin’s mind that he unwittingly stared at the prince, looking forward to his response.

“That’s an excellent idea.”

As a result of Siorin’s trust in the first prince’s wisdom, the legions commander’s crazy proposal had been both proffered and accepted.

“Let’s not hurt each other’s righteousness,” Siorin interjected, hoping that he could prevent the duel from overheating, and he continued as he said, “We should lighten our hearts in such a confrontation and not focus on winning or losing.”

He hoped to use the shining example of the earlier duels between the 112th Imperial Knights and some of the Templars to strengthen his effort. Those duels had all ended along reasonable lines, with no one chasing or claiming victory nor declaring defeat.

“Who is the best knight in the fortress?” the first prince asked, nullifying Siorin’s efforts toward keeping the peace.

“I have a number of great knights, and none of you seem capable enough to break them,” came the gruff response from the commander.

The alcohol-fueled atmosphere in the banqueting hall quickly grew cold, and the time for Siorin to intervene had passed. The situation escalated rapidly, and soon enough, the knights of both empire and kingdom stood facing each other in the middle of the hall.

Siorin did not even spare a glance at the imperial knights; he could only look at the knights of the kingdom: There stood his lovely daughter, and he couldn’t bear the thought of her getting hurt before his eyes.

Siorin began to whisper closely into the prince’s ear.

“Even now, if Your Highness admits that the challenge is a mistake made while everyone is drunk, the situation will not turn problematic.”

However, the first prince seemed to give the whispered warning little heed.

“Don’t worry. This will not interfere with the core of our mission,” came the prince’s casual response. As leader of the delegation, as well as Arwen’s father, Siorin could not overlook the prince’s behavior. He recalled his daughter’s words: “He is a person who does not believe in people very much.”

The prince now stood, his eyes set on a singular purpose as he pulled a small plaque from his pocket and held it out for all to see.

“Who shall prove to have the best knights, the Marquis, or the Legion Commander?”

The plaque that the prince held up turned out to be an official symbol of a marquis of the Burgundy Empire.

# CHAPTER 118
# AS IT IS KNOWN, LIKE A FRENZY (2)

Siorin was praying to the gods.

'Vsoo!' the imperial knight's sword began to cry. One moment later, the knight's sword had an aura. The sword was finely forged, and the aura itself was clear and stable. The energy coming from it felt fierce, even ferocious.

It looked like the knight had become incensed by the first prince's provocation.

In contrast, Arwen's appearance was rather shabby. Let alone her lack of a sword aura; she had not even readied her sword. She just stood there, her sword hanging in her grip.

To her father's eyes, her chances at victory looked precariously slim.

Siorin stared at the first prince, who could be said to be the cause of the incident, and told him, "If there is a problem due to this duel-"

"It won't happen," the first prince said in a careless tone before Siorin could speak any further. The prince then added that Arwen would never lose, and he said so in a strangely convinced tone.

Siorin became more uncomfortable with the situation. How could the prince still be so arrogant after he had brought such a situation about?

Still, Siorin's anger did not last long. Now, rather than anger, it was time for him to worry about the well-being of his daughter as she squared off against the imperial knight.

Siorin studied the situation carefully. If his daughter was faced with even the slightest amount of danger, he was going to stop the battle immediately. As a father, he never wanted to see his daughter bleed.

However, as he listened to the room, he realized he was alone in his nervousness.

“Sir Arwen is more advanced now.”

“Compared to the last time I saw her in Winter Castle, she has definitely deepened her skill.”

Siorin heard the whispers of the Templar Knights. Their attitudes were as easy-going as that of the first prince. None of them were concerned about Arwen.

“He’s already lost this one, poor fool.”

There were even those who pitied the imperial knight. Siorin remained impressed by the energy of the imperial knight and thought that it was dangerous. The Templars said it was like the barking of 10,000 small dogs, and laughed.

“Arwen is the second strongest in the delegation,” one of them said.

Siorin could only roll his eyes at such a statement, but still asked the deputy-commander of the Templars, “Second? So, you are saying that the only person stronger than Arwen is you, Sir Erhim?”

“Unfortunately, I am not the first,” Erhim said as he shook his head with a bitter smile, gazing for a moment at the first prince. He then said that the private knights of the first prince were above him. Siorin realized that he must be the only one in the delegation who did not know the ability and disposition of its knights.

Erhim’s statements meant that some present were stronger than the deputy-commander of the elite Templar Knights, said to be the best in the kingdom. It was hard to believe that Arwen, who had only been an apprentice until two years ago, was stronger than that.

Siorin truly struggled to believe this. But whether he believed it or not, the situation gradually played out just like the Templars had said it would.

The imperial knight had raised his vast amounts of mana, and yet his forehead soon began to sweat profusely. In contrast, Arwen’s face looked no different from when the duel had started.

She suddenly turned her head and moved her lips, lower than a whisper, forming the words ‘Tell me what you want.’

The first prince answered by saying, “Thoroughly smash him.”

Siorin had barely recognized his daughter then. She gave a small nod toward the prince and swung her sword.

‘Jirkif!’

As she pressed forward, the imperial knight stumbled back.

‘Prufak!’

The imperial knight ground his teeth and fixed his sword before him.

“How dare you speak so silently as we fight!” he exclaimed and then thrust his legs forward as he sliced his sword in a horizontal arc.

‘Suuk!’

Propelled by the momentum of his pounce, his blade swiftly swept toward Arwen’s throat. She easily avoided the attack by ducking beneath it.

‘Shuck!’ as she ducked, she swept her sword toward her opponent along the floor. The imperial knight was unpleasantly surprised and had to escape the attack by hastily jumping backward, not having time to block the blow in the slightest.

That was the beginning.

Arwen repeatedly aimed her strikes at the imperial knight’s lower body. Sometimes she stabbed her sword toward him in an instep, the short jabs forcing him back. At other times she swung her sword as if aiming to sever the tendons above his ankle.

Each time, the imperial knight desperately jerked his feet out of the way as she forced him to step back.

“Dae, what the hell are you doing!” the legion commander demanded from the knight with an angry face.

He had to shout, for a knight of the prideful empire was so publicly being toyed with.

‘Swik! Swit!’

Every time that Arwen moved her blade, the imperial knight had to jump. To the onlookers, it looked like the man was drunk, sobbing, and dancing all at once.

“How can you allow a knight of the kingdom to be joking around with you this way, Dae!?”

The legion commander then went on to say that Arwen was a shameless person who did not know how to respect the honor of her fellow knights.

“The empire’s knights should train harder in defending their nether regions. It’s because of such a lack of training that your man is helpless,” the first prince replied in a mocking tone.

“Woah!” the imperial knight cried as he struck at his foe. He was conscious of his angry commander, so he had disregarded Arwen’s sword sweeping in at his lower body and had struck down with force. It was a blow that showed his clear willingness to split open his opponent’s skull, even if it cost him a leg.

“Arwen!” Siorin shouted in fear.

Unlike her father, Arwen had remained calm. She didn’t dodge the sword that was flying toward her skull, nor did she attempt to withdraw her own sword mid-swing. She simply twisted the wrist of her free hand, balled up a fist, and punched into the imperial knight’s crotch.

‘Quack!’

Her sword slammed into his leg, and the man keeled back on the spot. His legs kicked into the air as he fell back, onto his head. It went without saying that, even if he still managed to wield his sword, he was no longer able to hit his intended target.

Arwen looked at the imperial knight, who had flipped over almost as if he wished to do a handstand. She then languidly stretched out her muscles, her face expressionless.

‘Drunch, drunch!’ the imperial knight’s legs spasmed as he rolled around on the floor.

He did not scream. He rolled around a bit, and then stopped moving. Other imperial knights rushed to him to check on his status.

As the Templars saw the imperial knights shaking their heads, they cheered.

“Hey, hoh, hoh!”

The imperials were angry.

“Has there ever been such misconduct!”

Their complaints could be heard in the midst of the Templars’ joyous whoops.

“Don’t tell me that knight was the best you have,” the first prince said, throwing sparks onto the oil.

“I’ll deal with her!”

“No! I’ll step up!”

After that, several of the fortress’s knights faced Arwen, one after the other.

De Gaulle was among them, and as an advanced knight, he was looking for any opportunity to make up for his humiliation after that first meeting on the border. There was also a triple-chain knight, one of the best in the fortress.

Not one of them could defeat Arwen.

‘Krak!’

An imperial knight, who had uttered some crudely-worded obscenities toward Arwen, received a broken jaw for his efforts. Some of the knights, who had jeered at her, saying that she was just a woman, got cut in bad places.

Even the fifth knight that faced her, who had stepped up in all seriousness, couldn’t block Arwen’s blade and ended up retching blood onto the floor.

“Next!” came Arwen’s provoking challenge as she called out her next opponent with a grim face.

The Templars were quite enthusiastic, while the imperial knights were swearing and cursing.

Siorin looked around blankly.

He couldn't figure out if this was the correct way in which to welcome a delegation from another country. And was that woman who stood in the middle of the hall the daughter that he had raised?

"Next!" Arwen boldly shouted after she had blown through her sixth opponent in no time. A hazy smile had by now crept onto her red-flushed face. She was truly a fish that had met water.

The imperial knights continued to step forward to break her winning streak.

Seven, eight, and nine; they too added to her victory tally as they ended up rolling over the floor.

"Next!"

Although Arwen had already gone through nine bouts, she did not look the least bit tired.

"Bring in the paladin," the legion commander said in a voice that dripped poison.

The heated atmosphere in the banqueting hall froze. Even those Templars who did not know the imperial language had faces that showed their uncertainty of whether they had heard the word 'paladin' correctly.

It was a natural reaction; it was so natural.

The empire called their quad-chain knights paladins. In terms that those of the kingdom could understand, summoning a paladin was no different than summoning a gifted Lion to a contest where ordinary knights competed. To exaggerate it to a greater extent, it was like an adult intervening in a fight between children.

This meant that the legion commander's pride was properly wounded and that he was not planning to end this spectacle with a defeat.

"Arwen," the first prince said as he came to her.

"Yes, Your Highness?"

Arwen had been preparing herself to face the paladin with a stern face before she had turned to the first prince.

“That’s enough.”

Upon hearing those words, Arwen chewed her lips. She seemed somehow resentful, but she did not reject the first prince’s order.

‘Shuuk,’ she sheathed her sword and returned to her spot after giving a glance at the imperial officials.

“What!?” the legion commander exclaimed.

“That is enough entertainment,” the first prince said, and while the legion commander looked like he would have a seizure, the prince added, “It wouldn’t be that honorable to win against a tiring knight.”

Upon hearing those words, the legion commander became stupefied by the truth. It was only then that he realized that a single knight of the kingdom had won nine battles with nary a pause.

“Then what about the other knights? I don’t think any of Your Highness’s knights can match her level,” the commander almost begged the prince to continue the duels.

“Entertainment should always end in an entertaining fashion. If we fight more now, we might end up hurting each other’s feelings,” came the first prince’s shameless answer, for he had provoked the challenge in the first place. The drunken face of the legion commander had turned quite red by now, and it was a face that seemed as if it would explode at any time.

At that moment, the first prince touched his chest, which was an extremely unnatural and ridiculous gesture.

Siorin laughed at the prince’s appearance, waiting to see the prince’s intention.

Shit! The prince had taken something from his chest pocket.

“Hey, what is this, do you remember? It’s something that cannot be broken,” the first prince said as he held up a plaque, looking back and forth from it to the commander in an exaggerated fashion.

“What!? How did you get that?”

“I didn’t mean to make it look so deliberate, but it’s the true article,” the prince said, his voice sounding terribly awkward, “When someone happened to visit us from the empire, they gave it to me.”

The words and actions of the prince did not match up, for, despite the naive lilt of his voice, he was holding up a bronzed plaque with the name ‘Montpellier’ etched into it.

“I figured that if I had this, no one here would ignore me. But then, I told myself my worries were useless. Even though I am a prince from a small country, I am still royalty, right? I didn’t know that if I didn’t have a sponsorship like this, people would ignore me.”

The legion commander had shut his mouth.

“He will be here as soon as his preparations are done!” the knight who had left to call the paladin announced to all in obvious elation. The frightened legion commander beckoned the knight over and whispered something into his ear.

The knight looked at the legion commander, and then at the first prince with some perplexity, and then once more left the banqueting hall. In the end, the paladin didn’t show up, and the banquet was over. With the banquet having ended in such a lukewarm manner, Siorin could only give a vain laugh. From the moment that the duel had been confirmed, he had hoped to prevent it. Siorin had wondered as to the best way to end it without sullying the honor of the Leonberger royal family, or the first prince’s pride.

However, his anxiety proved to be useless in the end.

The prince had blatantly used the name of the Montpellier family, naming them as his imperial backers, and he had done it with such confidence that Siorin gradually felt embarrassed.

Well, the prince had done it out of common sense, but he had still done something unimaginable.

But the effect of his actions are clear, and the scenario he had created was daunting.

It seems that his daughter’s words were true: Siorin would be surprised by Prince

Adrian no matter what.

It could surely be said that the first prince's actions were exceptional, and Siorin soon learned that this was but the beginning.

Once the banquet was over, Siorin learned as much when he stood alone with Prince Adrian and told him that it had to take great self-discipline to behave so unexpectedly.

"It's just the beginning," the first prince said with a smile and then shared his plans with Siorin.

"But if that is done, Your Highness's reputation within the empire…" Siorin said in dismay and trailed off, but the first prince wasn't perturbed.

"Anyway, I can face it, after what I've been through in the kingdom. I know this isn't my country anyway," the first prince said with a somehow excited face.

At a quick glance, the prince looked like an unbridled foal.

* * *

Annual visits by delegations from the Leonberg Kingdom was no new thing.

What was new was that a member of the royal family had been included on the mission, and that was the only novelty. The emperor and a few nobles were the only ones who really cared about the small country on the outskirts of the empire. No one cared about the envoys from that selfsame country.

As things were, the delegation could disappear into the wastes without anyone really knowing whether they had come or gone.

However, for some unknown reason, there was a lot of talk about the Leonberg mission these days.

"They said that these Leonbergers terribly like to show of the dancing of their knights."

"Ah, but every noble that is met with suggests a battle between knights, yes? He is a very young man, so he can't really understand his country's position."

Most of the hottest rumors were about the journey of the enemy delegation from the Leonberg Kingdom. The gossip went that the Leonbergers were a royal family that loved to show off their knights and that the prince was eager to appease his vanity without considering the political position of the kingdom.

Wherever he travels, he proposes a battle between his knights and those of the empire. There is no place where he has not caused a furor.

“Because they are a small country, all they can really do is to boast. And even after boasting, if you compare them with our empire, they do not have much to show for themselves.”

The imperial nobles mocked the first prince’s impulsive streak and his pride. They didn’t doubt that his misplaced pride would be squashed under the might of the great Burgundy Empire.

He wasn’t beaten yet, and the rumors the nobles heard were half-truths and not terrifying enough.

The knights of the border fortresses had been defeated by the knights of the prince, one garrison after the other. Every single knight of the 97th Imperial Knights was defeated as well.

It was even said that the famous swordsman, Byeongchang, had suffered a miserable defeat.

The knights of the kingdom – believed to be far inferior and no match for the imperial knights – were winning their duels in streaks.

“Tsu. They are overly proud of their strength in this early phase. Their victories are but flukes.”

“No one is great enough to war against the empire, so our knights have become a bit rusty.”

The nobles had now begun to tut-tut and stick out their tongues at the pathetic display of the imperial knights.

“How long must we live on this earth and see this prince of the kingdom spitting in the face of our empire?”

“It also possible that these matches are fixed. Are these nobles of the border even aware that they are nobles of Burgundy?”

They now also cursed the nobles on the border, accusing them of playing games and giving the first prince the victories, maybe even to appease him.

“I heard just now, all of Count Anjou’s knights were smashed!”

The gossiping nobles could no longer laugh at those on the border when they heard that the famous Grand Lord, Count Anjou, had also been embarrassed by the knights of the delegation.

Soon after that, even more surprising news came to the ears of the nobles.

“It is said that the Marquis of Montpellier backs the first prince. He has even given the prince the plaque of his family.”

This, in effect, meant an imperial marquis openly supported the first prince.

“Ah! It looks like the Marquis of Montpellier has found a scarecrow prince who will devour the kingdom completely.”

“If the Marquis of Montpellier backs him, does that mean that this first prince will be the only royal man who shall remain in Leonberg?”

They discussed the patronage of Montpellier and figured it part of his schemes to defeat the kingdom. All the knights and nobles agreed on this conclusion with some satisfaction.

“These dueling victories of theirs won’t last long anyway.”

“Aren’t they set to soon arrive in the territory of the Marquis of Yvesinth?”

All the nobles believed that the unlikely victory streak will soon end and be unveiled as the comedy that it truly was. The Marquis of Yvesinth was one of the delegation’s hosts, and he was a great aristocrat and guardian of the realm. He was also one of the few nobles in the empire who had two paladins in his service.

The news soon came that the delegation had reached the holdings of the Marquis of Yvesinth.

All the imperial nobles looked forward to the exciting news that would soon grace their ears.

A few days later, reports came in that the delegation's knights and the knights of the Marquis of Yvesinth had fought. However, the nature of this news was quite contrary to what the nobles had expected it to be.

"What? The paladins of the Marquis of Yvesinth lost?"

"It seems that the delegation includes a champion of the kingdom! It must!"

The nobles were astonished, astounded, and utterly flabbergasted.

"I cannot believe this. It makes no sense for our paladins to lose, even if there is a champion of the kingdom here."

The fact that the kingdom's knights were inferior to those of the empire was something that every imperial noble knew well. It was difficult for the proud nobles of the empire to hear that their great paladins had lost against a champion of the kingdom.

Still, there came even more surprising news.

"What? The official list of envoys does not include a champion of the kingdom?"

They now had to swallow the even harder truth that the paladins had not even been beaten by a champion, by what those in the kingdom called a 'quad-chain knight.'

The nobility of the empire was now even more embarrassed.

"Then who the hell are they saying defeated our two paladins?"

It was now the time when some of the nobles started paying particular attention to the members of the Leonberg delegation, treating their actions with more seriousness.

Among the above-mentioned group were the imperial principes.

"Is the Marquis of Montpellier crazy!?" one princeps exclaimed as he cursed the marquis for backing the immature prince.

“Wouldn’t we be doing our imperial prestige a favor by stopping such foolishness?”

Some principes said the marquis should be punished appropriately for his close relationship with such a brash prince from a marginal country.

“Now that’s an interesting guy,” one princeps said, showing interest in the prince from Leonberg, who had the Marquis of Montpellier as his guarantor.

“We’re getting ready to leave.”

And then there were those principes who even decided to leave the imperial palace to meet the prince. It was now about three months after the delegation of the Leonberg Kingdom had entered the lands of the empire.

* * *

At the same time that some of the imperial principes began their journey to meet the first prince, the Marquis of Montpellier was staring at a great pile of paper that had been stacked up before him. His face was completely enchanted as he took in the sight of it.

Urgent messages had flown along the imperial lines of communication, and the content of those letters was consistent: They all contained vehement protests.

‘Pwot, pwot.’

At that very moment, the crystal ball started flashing, and the marquis reflexively touched its surface. From it emanated the voice of a high-ranking nobleman, one of the mightiest in the empire.

No! Is that the Marquis of Yvesinth?

It was indeed a greeting from that very man, who had never shown much favor to Montpellier.

“I have activated my emergency contact apparatus to reach you, Montpellier.”

Montpellier could only close his eyes.

What the hell am I doing here!?

# CHAPTER 119
# AS IT IS KNOWN, LIKE A FRENZY (3)

Siorin could feel an ever-increasing number of eyes watching the delegation as the days passed.

Wherever they went, there were always gazes that followed them, and always ears that eavesdropped. When they left the cities and entered the wilderness, he could feel that there were those following them. This change had taken place ever since that first bizarre battle the first prince had instigated.

Prince Adrian made the knights of the kingdom face their imperial counterparts wherever they went.

Sometimes the bouts turned out to be one-on-one affairs to test the mettle of individuals, and at other times, the prince arranged group-on-group bouts to hide the true power of his knights.

Siorin had counted, and the number of completed battles, both individual and grouped, now numbered exactly two-hundred. Surprisingly, the kingdom's knights had not suffered a single defeat. It was an incredible record, and it was all thanks to the first prince's amazing foresight.

Prince Adrian always decided who would face whom, when one knight should step forward and another withdraw. As long as the prince implemented his own arrangement over the battles, defeat was not on the cards. Siorin was curious about it all, and he sometimes imagined the young prince somehow had hidden knowledge about the status of the imperial knights.

It was to that great an extent that the first prince's vision and foresight had been sharpened. And such tactics, surprisingly, also worked against the paladins of the Marquis of Yvesinth.

The marquis, who had not seemed trouble in the least when he had seen the Montpellier family's plaque, had proposed duels against his paladins. His plan was a seeming masterpiece that clearly showed his intention of shattering the morale of

the delegation which had so greatly risen in recent times.

Siorin had thought that the prince would refuse the challenge, but such was not the case.

The prince had happily accepted the Marquis of Yvesinth's proposal, but had delayed the time of the bouts into the dead of night.

Compared to the kingdom's cold atmosphere, the climate of the central imperial region was so hot that it was best to conduct serious duels only after the sun has set and when the earth has cooled. The Marquis of Yvesinth did not refuse such conditions.

When night fell, the prince had chosen his knights. They were the three most silent men in the delegation, along with two unknown women who did not speak and wore hooded cloaks.

Their titles and origins were unknown to Siorin, and he only knew the men's names to be Gwain, Trindall, and Kampra, as written on the list of the prince's companions.

The prince made these three silent knights face the paladins, as the format of the battle was three versus two. Even though the kingdom's knights numbered one more than the imperial paladins, the prince didn't seem to care. On the contrary, the paladins felt that it would be unreasonable for two of them to face a mere three knights, so one of them stepped back and stated that he would only join in if the situation demanded it.

"Don't be silly!" the first prince had exclaimed, but of course, the paladins had pretended not to hear him.

The bout started, and a terrible battle ensued. The three knights constantly flapped their gums as they held their swords, and kept denigrating the powers of the paladins and their meager swordsmanship.

"Are you a paladin, then? Let's see whether you deserve to use that title!"

"My stomach is fluttering! Isn't it great, that I feel drunk without having drunk a drop of liquor?"

"It's been a long time since I faced off against the empire's knights! It's nice to face

ancient foes."

Siorin had figured that, if the empire's paladins were defeated, it would not be due to poor swordplay but rather their impatience and confusion at the three knight's insults.

However, despite their constant chatter, the swordplay of those three knights was never lacking. Even Siorin, who had only learned the art of the sword due to his position as a noble, noticed that the knights possessed specialized and exceedingly subtle skills with the sword.

They were so agile, their movements organic.

But that was not enough: The one who ruled the duel was the empire's paladin. So great was his destructive powers as one of the gifted that the knights had started vomiting blood, and it seemed as if flies would soon start to circle their corpses.

However, even faced with such great adversity, the three knights continued to laugh at the paladin. They said that the knights of the empire had greatly regressed. Even if they were brothers and sisters of battle, there was no righteousness in them.

"You are not a paladin! You are just a swordsman!"

The knights, after saying that the paladins were sad and pathetic, stepped back and whispered something under their breath.

"The king is coming."

It sounded like they were singing a song, even if the casual observer would just interpret it as meaningless whispers.

"No one dares bow down in worship."

When one of them whispered, the second knight repeated the verse, and the third one thereafter.

"Worship of the king is the wellspring of our being."

And shortly after that verse was spoken, a dazzling flash of mana erupted from the knights.

Siorin did not even realize that the duel had ended.

By the time he snapped awake, the bout was over, and the bloody paladin was kneeling on the floor. The three knights were also in a poor state, for they too looked like they would keel over right away. They were staggering about.

Then, the first prince quickly announced that the battle has ended and that the kingdom's knights were the victors. The remaining paladin had noticed his comrade's peril too late, so he had jumped forward and drawn his sword, but his attempted intervention came too late.

He eventually retreated to his spot, staring angrily at the three knights who were now lying on the floor.

The Templars, who had tensely watched the situation unfold, then burst into excited shouts and cheered. Siorin had momentarily forgotten his official station as he had celebrated alongside the Templar Knights. His heart felt like bursting.

Siorin had always hated to see the nobles of the powerless kingdom tucking their tails between their legs in the presence of imperial officials. He had always hated to see the king of Leonberg's every effort frustrated whenever an imperial ambassador showed his face in the capital. Now he was surrounded by the cheering knights of the kingdom, who roared in victory after they had witnessed the defeat of an imperial paladin. He had even blushed as he took in the sight.

Still, neither his joy at victory nor the small reward of a historic humiliation lasted long. The moment that the first prince brought Arwen out to battle with the remaining paladin, Siorin's heart had pounded in his breast and then ceased beating.

The paladin was determined to make up for his comrade's defeat, and he was more than willing to break the spirit of the kingdom by killing its knights, if necessary.

He's putting Arwen before such a bitter paladin!? No matter how much she has been honed, her skills have not been verified to be on such a level. It's unacceptable!

However, the first prince was resolute. He said that victory could not be claimed unless it was through a one-on-one contest, and Arwen sympathized with his words.

Siorin took in the face of his daughter: Fear had not crept into her eyes, rather, she was determined, and Count Kirgayen knew that he would not be able to stop her.

And so the duel began.

Arwen fought with astonishing proficiency against the imperial paladin. Still, she had not yet gained the wall, and the paladin stood far beyond that wall of impregnable achievement.

All of her attacks were so easily swatted away by the paladin's Aura Blade. Her spirit and energies were scattered by the paladin's overflowing fount of mana.

Still, the bout continued for a long time.

After she had been forced to roll to the floor several times, Arwen's neat clothes became muddied, and her once-tied hair became caked and stiffened by blood and sweat.

Everyone knew that the paladin was taking his time, deliberately toying with her.

He wished to at least humiliate someone in order to rectify the results of the previous bout in the minds of his comrades. On the larger stage, he aimed to firmly imprint the gap between empire and kingdom on the delegation.

Siorin asked that the duel be stopped, but the first prince refused. Prince Adrian just told him to wait. Siorin didn't know what the hell they were waiting for, and he didn't want to know. He surely didn't want to see his daughter repeatedly wounded until she finally fell before her foe.

Siorin was about to step up on his authority as the delegation's leader, but the prince restrained him.

He could only look at his daughter while the prince had held him back.

Arwen had been battered to the floor, but she now raised her sword. Then, she grabbed onto her hair, tangled and dirtied by blood and sweat, and cut it all off with a quick upward slice of her blade. The fine hair fell to the floor, and Arwen's face, up to now obscured by her loose hair, was revealed.

And she was smiling.

Hers was a very reassuring smile; an expression of satisfaction that one would wear were they to finally get what they had always longed for.

‘Wroo, wrooo!’ cried Arwen’s sword.

And at that very moment, a dazzling flash of light bloomed from the tip of her blade. It was fundamentally different from a sword aura, containing a sharper and more destructive light.

It was an Aura Blade, and it was at that instant that another champion was born to the kingdom.

Arwen straightened her sword before herself. Unlike before, the paladin did not dare to hamper his strikes, for he suddenly took his opponent very seriously.

And then, Arwen’s ethereal swordplay weaved in and out dozens of times, forcing the paladin to block the blows on a back-footing, and he finally surrendered.

It was only then that Prince Adrian’s face, which had been calm as Arwen had suffered and rolled across the floor, became distorted.

“Damn you! You piece of trash, you have no respect for those that walk the path of the sword!” the prince swore aloud.

Siorin could not figure out what the first prince meant. It was only until later that he learned the prince’s meaning: Arwen had quickly been approaching the moment of full realization of her powers, and the paladin had forcibly stopped that process by surrendering.

Prince Adrian said that, rather than damaging the spirits of the delegation, the paladin had showed how lowly a mindset he truly had, so pettily curtailing the natural development of the knights from other countries.

The prince had cursed the paladin for a few days after that.

The words he used were beyond colorful; they were the type of curses one might expect a stock merchant to use on his swine as he drove them to market.

“I mean, even if I die tomorrow, I still don’t want anything to go well for that fucker. He’s an intolerable whelp, and he’ll probably sell his own cousin into slavery if it’ll gain him a small plot of land.”

As she listened to the prince going on in such a manner, Arwen could not help but

laugh.

There was no feeling of loss and regret to be seen on her features after the events of that night. Now that she had come close to that ultimate level, she said that she would reach it if she moved steadily forward. And even if the process proved to be slow, Arwen said that she had the first prince, who would guide her along the path.

Looking at his daughter, Siorin's mood became grim for some unidentifiable reason.

His daughter had left the family holdings to become a knight, and here she was, standing on her own with a proud bearing. On the one hand, Siorin was overwhelmed by her pride and boldness. On the other hand, he was experiencing an uncontrollable feeling of loss and regret.

It was particularly when he saw his daughter glancing at the prince with a deep look in her eyes that such feelings came to the fore.

"Doesn't your head feel empty?" Siorin heard the first prince shamelessly ask as he brushed his hand along Arwen's ebony hair.

"I always just left it as it was, but I've never felt any special attachment to it. Rather, it feels just right now, regardless of what others say," Arwen replied.

Siorin was certainly not pleased with his daughter's attitude as she so casually accepted the first prince's touch. Still, he repressed such ugly feelings.

Right now, he was the leader of the delegation, and he had to prioritize that duty above his role as a father. That was easier said than done.

The first prince had recently started to be closer to Arwen, and whenever Siorin noticed this, it felt as if he was boiling inside. The prince's intentions were so clear. Siorin started to suspect that whenever the first prince looked at him, he must've been enjoying seeing him seethe inside.

He knew all of it, and it was hard to bear.

"Stop it!" he wanted to shout. Had it not been for the sudden appearance of an imperial messenger, Siorin would have surely exploded.

"The Leonberg delegation has been scheduled to meet an imperial noble, so prepare

yourselves right away," a mounted, golden-armored imperial knight said as he halted before the leaders of the delegation.

"All must disarm, and be ready," he then ordered, stating that all weapons had to be stowed away in the wagons and carriages.

"And who is this noble, that we must-"

"His Imperial Highness has come," the knight interrupted Siorin. Count Kirgayen then turned to find the first prince. Prince Adrian had been making some nasty joke regarding Arwen's hair, but he turned to face Siorin at once.

"Ask him which one it is," the prince said.

Siorin nodded, and asked the imperial knight, "Can you tell us which princeps came?"

The knight of the empire frowned as he heard the question. It was as if the nobles of the small country were planning what their response would be depending on which princeps they were to meet.

* * *

From the moment that I had entered the empire, I had wondered which one would come to me first.

Would it be the third, who they said was an explosive fool, or the fifth, who was rumored to have more stable, if mundane, qualities?

And now, from afar, I saw the knights in golden armor approach.

"His Highness the Third Princeps of the Grand Burgundy Empire has arrived! Leonberg's delegation should show the requisite reverence to His Imperial Highness!"

I looked beyond the wall of knights, and directly at their charge. The third princeps was stiff-necked, stiff enough that I thought his neck would snap under the tension at any time. He raised his shoulders as much as he was able to. He likely believed his expression to be stern, but to others, he just seemed arrogant and unscrupulous.

So here was an imperial prince that remarkably reminded me of the first time I had seen the idiot Adrian as he had swung me about.

Perhaps there were slight differences, but I could see that this guy was just as filthy, stupid, and incompetent. The fact of the matter was clear: The princeps before me had all sorts of terrible qualities, on the scale of a natural disaster.

'Come on then', I thought as I awaited him.

I laughed happily as I watched the imperial disaster approach me.

# CHAPTER 120
# BRONZE DREAM (1)

Siorin stepped forward and bowed deeply at the waist.

“The Leonberg delegation greets His Highness the Third Princeps of the Burgu-“

“I’m just going to skip all the quaint greetings,” the third princeps said as he cut Siorin off, despite there being plenty of time to finish the greetings that are decreed by procedure.

“Rather, where is the prince of Leonberg?” As he said this, the third princeps’ eyes had locked onto mine. Meeting that gaze, it felt as if a snake was slithering over and into me.

I did not avert my gaze, nor did I pay the proper obeisance like everyone else. I merely held my tongue and took a step forward, revealing that I was the prince of the kingdom.

The princeps glared at me with serpentine eyes, and I, in turn, kept on meeting that gaze. Not one of us seemed willing to end the staring contest. There was surely not another person born into this world with such horrible traits. Compared to him, even Adelia’s brutish characteristics could be said to be lovely.

I once more confirmed his traits and again admired the brutal reality of them.

Is there really such a hideous guy extant in this world?

If he had been born a commoner, he would long ago have butchered his family and neighbors.

Were he to have been a knight, he would have been a merciless killer, always holding a knife to his master’s back.

His was a temperament that would lead to the ruination of tens of thousands of lives if he was a noble of the realm.

And if he were an emperor, the millennium empire of Burgundy would be completely scorched to the ground, not so much as leaving a cornerstone as proof that it had ever existed.

Any life he lived would be a hideous thing, and such a man was a princeps.

What thing can be more terrible than his continued existence in this world?

For anyone who was hostile to the empire, the third princeps I now faced was like a burning beacon of hope. Sure enough, the same held true for the original Adrian and his value to his kingdom.

The third princeps was like a gift that the universe had prepared for the sake of the Leonberg realm. I looked upon him with infinite favor.

Perhaps he had read such feelings in my eyes, for the face of the princeps, still staring at me, now let slip a somewhat uncomfortable expression.

It seemed that he had mistaken my appraisal of him for open admiration and even envy.

I did not care in the slightest whether he misunderstood the portent of my gaze.

“How long have I waited for a day like today,” the third princeps said as he graced me with a wide grin. In truth, he didn’t have the slightest idea of who he had been truly waiting for.

* * *

I’m certainly not good at dealing with people.

Perhaps because I had spent so many centuries as a sword, I was ignorant of the inner feelings of others, as well as awkward when it came to expressing my own. Even if I stayed silent, no one would say that I was a homely person.

It didn’t match my temperament to talk bullshit words if they didn’t come from my heart.

Nevertheless, I experienced no difficulty in humoring and flattering the third princeps.

It was all thanks to my notoriety.

The rumored me was a royal villain who had abandoned his father, a precariously positioned prince who didn't know when the throne would be claimed by his brother, with himself imprisoned after the takeover. It was also well known that my trip to the empire was due to the fact that the hatred between the king and me had reached its apex, and so I was exiled from the kingdom.

The third princeps projected his own twisted personality onto me. He was not being recognized by his father, the emperor, so he had made the haphazard blunder that such a situation also applied to me. He acted comradely toward me, as he felt a natural friendship existed between us.

He even encouraged me by giving out advice that was no advice at all.

"In the future, you will consider me your brother," he eventually said, saying that we could walk the righteous path together.

It seemed beyond funny.

I struggled to hold back bursting laughter as I listened to him.

There was no need for me to act in a way that did not fit my temperament, nor did I have to forcibly impress him by making him aware of my past achievements. Even if I just kept quiet, the third princeps guessed as to my emotions, making presumptions as to my personality, and even kept giving me advice regarding my future.

"Don't trust your brother," he said, "because it wouldn't be ideal for your brother to become the king when I become the emperor."

On the third day after meeting the third princeps, he was already considering me to be exactly the kind of person that he was. And on the fifth day, he asked whether I would aid him in the case of an emergency, his tone taking on a subtle modulation. He said that the backing of both the kingdom and the Marquis of Montpellier would gift him with great political strength.

It was unknown when and what this 'emergency' that he referred to would be, but with him, I didn't even have to guess that it wouldn't be a normal situation.

I halted his diatribe, asking him what the situation would be and what he would

want me to do.

The guy looked around for a while and then replied in that subtle tone of his, saying that when the emperor made the incorrect choice, he would employ any means and method to rectify that error. He needed more allies to do such a thing.

It was all so casual, but ultimately, he was saying that if the emperor handed the throne over to another princeps, he would start a civil war.

The third princeps went on to state that if such a day ever came, the support of the kingdom and Montpellier would be an enormous asset that would strengthen his attempts.

I readily accepted his offer, saying that if it were to happen, I would mobilize as much force as possible in his aid.

“Excellent! I knew my beloved brother would understand my will!” the third princeps exclaimed as he patted my shoulders, greatly pleased. I didn’t know what to do in that situation.

“But just to make sure, I’ll need you to leave that in writing,” the third princeps said as he pulled a parchment from his chest pocket.

“Don’t get me wrong – it’s not that I don’t believe you, brother. This is just a formal procedure. In the distant future, when I am the emperor, this deed will be proof of your support.”

In essence, he was asking me to sign a document of loyalty, similar to the one I had forced the Marquis of Montpellier to sign. The document explicitly stated that the signee agreed to mobilize his forces if the need for it emerged.

I did not hesitate to put an official seal on the parchment, although the seal was not that of the Leonbergers. I had instead dipped the Marquis of Montpellier’s plaque in ink, and so stamped the document. The third princeps saw the Montpellier family seal imprinted on the agreement, and his grin almost reached his ears. He had stated that he needed both the support of the kingdom and the marquis, but in reality, the signature of a high-ranking imperial noble was more useful to him than the signature of a small country’s prince.

Still, the third princeps snapped to his senses and asked me why I had substituted

my own seal for that of Montpellier.

“Isn’t this a more reliable seal, more reliable than the promise of a prince who hasn’t even succeeded to the throne? The Montpellier family and I might have two bodies, but we’re in the same boat,” I answered him.

My argument had immediately convinced him, and he was very happy. In return for my promise of aid, he ordered a wizard to tend to the wounds of the Templars and the others. The third princeps didn’t even seem to care that such wounds were the result of my knights cutting through the knights of his country.

Taking it even a step further, he went on to say that he was greatly interested in knightly battles. He went on to give me information on the imperial families that we were yet to visit, as well as telling me all about their knights.

For me, as a foreign prince, his words were a great gift, and I was elated at being able to open it and see what was inside. Even more surprising was the fact that no one in the entourage of the third princeps tried to prevent him from spilling such secrets.

Not even his knights, some presumed to be paladins, or his wise wizards restrained his flapping tongue. They just watched the goat of a third princeps from afar.

Studying that scene, I could see the true nature of things.

There remained none who could give sagely and wise advice to the third princeps. Only the greedy crows that had flocked to him to feed upon the rice cakes of his largess and ignorance remained.

The third princeps stayed with me for a few days more.

If I hadn’t been scheduled to meet with another noble family, he would surely have followed me all the way to the imperial capital, Hwangdo.

“Sorry, but we have to break up here,” the third princeps told me with true regret.

“Let’s meet again in Hwangdo.” He reached out to me, and I grasped his hand with some reluctance.

‘Warak.’

The third prince was unable to marshal his passion, so he suddenly hugged me.

“In the future, brother, scholars will record it, and the people will praise our historical encounter,” he whispered excitedly into my ear, his voice evincing a playful lilt. As if suddenly conscious of the gazes of those around us, he stopped hugging me.

He then mounted his horse, and as he looked at me, attempting to strike a heroic pose, he started to laugh.

The third princeps laughed and laughed, managing to say that it felt good to let go once in a while. He truly seemed to believe that our meeting would be recorded in posterity.

I half-sympathized with that sentiment, for the meeting between him and I will surely be one of historical import. The only difference from how he imagined it was that, in history, this would be remembered as the day when an independent Leonberg became a reality.

As I watched the third princeps’ party move off, Ranger Jordan sneaked to my side and asked, “Are you sorry about it?”

“No way,” came my reply.

“Huh, I thought you would be disappointed when he left. I have never seen two brothers fit so well together in this world.”

“It might appear so on the surface,” I said and then realized that Jordan must be bored if he had the time to wag his mouth so. As the ranger seemed to have some free time, I decided to give him a mission.

“Go and scout ahead, see if there is a spot where we can encamp,” I ordered him.

Jordan seemed suddenly regretful that he had so openly talked with me, but he disappeared right quick as he led his rangers away.

“Why are we being punished if the captain did it?” one of them moaned.

As I listened to receding complaints of the rangers, I smiled.

“Your Highness.”

I turned my head and noticed that Siorin stood there. While he had been on the road in close proximity to the third princeps, he had a pretty hard time of it. His handsome face has become exhausted in just a few days.

I was tired as well and indeed fed up after having to deal with the third princeps.

He was an awful man, very talkative, and never aware of those around him.

I had not lost my temper with him because he felt such a strong connection to me, and I had to make sure that I gave him what he wanted so I could strengthen my own strategy.

Nevertheless, it was exhausting to face such a piece of trash day in and day out. It felt as if the stench of his rotten mind only left me once he himself was gone.

But what could I do truly do? This was just the beginning; I had but hooked the lure and thrown out the line. A fisherman must be patient. Those fish who sought to bite into the savory bait that was the kingdom and Montpellier's support still swam all through the empire.

"Well, where is our next stop?" I asked Siorin.

"That would be Count Montaigne. According to the princeps' information, he has no paladins, but the elite and renowned Hawk Knights are under the control of the Montaigne family."

Upon Siorin's answer, I thrust my head back and called, "Your next opponents have white plumes!"

The Templar Knights answered me with roars.

"I'll eat a nice white hawk as if it was a plump white chicken, and I'm going to enjoy it very much," one Templar piped up.

"Is that right, then? So we're eating fresh meat tonight, innit?" Jordan, freshly returned from his reconnaissance, made himself heard. He then complained, asking why I had sent him to find a campsite if we were going to overnight in a castle.

His grumblings were roundly ignored.

* * *

After the third princeps left us, we stopped over at Count Montaigne's and smashed through the White Hawk Knights. We triumphed over two more knightly orders as we passed through two more provinces.

Now, the imperial capital was near.

I called the delegation to a halt and ordered a rest.

While no one had said anything thus far, it would be weird if the Templars and the soldiers weren't mentally exhausted by our journey through the empire.

While the knights rested, I summoned Niccolo into my carriage.

"Is it going well?" I asked him, and instead of answering, he shoved a parchment before my face.

It was a large map filled with a compact and crisp script.

The delegation's journey was depicted on the map, along with information of the knightly orders that the kingdom's knights had dealt with. I was all written in clear lettering, and the recent information the third princeps had shared regarding the imperial knighthood was also recorded.

"If you make calculations based on the average military organization of the empire, that is one hundred knights and one-thousand five-hundred soldiers per demarcated square area, it is no difficulty to determine the approximate number of troops stationed throughout the entire empire."

As Niccolo stated this, I gave a happy laugh.

My primary intention in coming to the empire had been to measure its strength and comprehend its political atmosphere. The duels I had initiated had been a means to such ends.

From the outset, the delegation's route had been planned along the lines of strategic military deployment, and our return route has been set up so that we would visit and scout out all those fortresses and families not yet encountered by the delegation.

So, I was basically gathering vital military intel while traveling through the heart of the empire. While the empire has been reigning as an absolute superpower for such a long time, it had become softened by neglect borne from stubborn arrogance.

And my reconnaissance was being aided by a stupid princeps.

I handed the map back to Niccolo and ensured that Gunn would keep a close watch over it. If something were to happen on the journey, Gunn would be able to steal away the map without anyone being the wiser.

After Niccolo left me, I toured our camp for a time.

We were in the heart of the imperial territory, basically in the middle of the enemy camp, yet the soldiers and knights all seemed relatively relaxed. It was surely thanks to the victories we had achieved through our duels.

The troops had the confidence of a victorious army, and they seemed in no way exhausted, nor withered.

I sorely wanted all the knights and legions of the kingdom to be like these troops. They did not hesitate at the mere mention of the empire, and they all wanted to be reborn as true soldiers of the kingdom who could battle with confidence and valor.

I believed that such a day would soon be dawning. As I looked at the soldiers and pondered the distant future, I felt a gaze fall on me.

I turned my head and saw that Gwain was looking at me.

He didn't avert his gaze, and I noticed that he had something to say.

I motioned for him to follow me. After I had entered my carriage and waited for a while, Gwain made his appearance.

"If you have something to say, then say it," I told him.

He hesitated for a long time after hearing my words, saying nothing.

Then: "What the hell have you done to my body?"

# CHAPTER 121
# BRONZE DREAM (2)

From the moment that Gwain got lost, he knew he had a problem.

However, he didn't think deeply about it at the time, even if there were the remains of food on his mouth and hands, with his insides feeling bloated. The first time he knew he had a serious problem, was after some time had passed when he already arrived at the royal capital. When he woke up, his body was covered in dirt, and there were even blood stains on his boots.

He learned that he followed the prince on a mission late on the previous night and that a bloodied corpse had been buried during the mission.

It was a far different problem than simply feeling stuffy and being covered in food waste.

He had left the palace without being conscious of it, and it seemed he had even swung his sword. He pondered this state of affairs, but no solution was to be found. Since nothing happened after that, Gwain buried his resentment deep within his heart, that was until he visited the castle of the Marquis of Yvesinth.

When he awoke the next morning, he found out that he had become a hero who had defeated a paladin of the empire. The new title, 'Three Indomitable Knights', was another bonus.

How had his body become like this? His skin was full of cuts and stab wounds, and the mana stored in his body was in disarray.

Well, having fought a paladin, it was natural for his body to be a mess. The problem was that he couldn't remember it.

The same counted for his comrades, who had fought with him. Gwain wracked his head for days, thinking about it and then thinking some more.

Then the first prince suddenly came to mind.

The first prince knew that they had faced the paladin. It was an ugly thing, that such a prince had let them battle. Gwain thought that perhaps the prince knew something.

“So you came to see me?” the first prince asked, and Gwain nodded.

“If you couldn’t have won, do you think I would have used you like a hand of bad cards, juts discarding it?”

Gwain was left speechless for an instant. It was an unexpected question.

“It is a problem that you can understand if you use your brains a little, but why can’t you and your comrades see things in that way? What did you expect?”

Gwain was greatly embarrassed, so much so that he could not think of how to answer the little prince. His mouth was agape.

‘Creek,’ he stood up and decided to flee from the wagon, but the first prince caught his arm and said, “No. You came to the right place. Sit down and watch.”

Pretending to give in, Gwain sat back down and awaited an explanation.

“You really want to know?”

“It happened to my body. Of course, I want to know.”

The first prince asked Gwain a few times whether he truly wished to hear the truth. He also said that sometimes ignorance could be the greatest medicine. Gwain was afraid, but he hardened his heart and demanded the truth.

“If you really want to hear it, then.”

The first prince then started talking, his face serious. The truth he revealed proved to be shocking.

“So this ghost, I mean, this Death Knight’s soul, is in my body?”

Gwain was drained after hearing this and started to grope at his flesh, but the first prince kept explaining in a low voice.

“Death Knights are not unconditionally evil beings. They are the hallowed spirits of

the knights who had given their lives for the founding king. Now they remain in this world for a while, for they still have work to do. I don't know what this mission is they are staying behind for. All that is certain is that they will never harm you."

"You say that now!"

"If you don't believe me, study your mana. I don't know for sure; your amount of mana must be more than before. Your pain should have eased as well."

The prince certainly did not speak false. As it was his own body, Gwain knew it better than anyone. But it was still unacceptable, for this wasn't about gains and losses.

It was a threat to his existence, and Gwain feared that he, as a human, could disappear at any time. The Death Knight could take over his body right this moment. As he imagined that, his heart constricted, and his body grew cold.

It was a horror he had never before experienced.

"Again, they won't take your body away from you."

"They've already used my body many times. I can't even remember my own actions! You know that they use it again and again!"

'Kreeuk,' the carriage's door opened and the prince's warriors appeared. It seems that they had come running after hearing the shouting.

"Your Highness, are you okay?"

Their hands were on the hilts of their swords, and they gave Gwain sharp looks. Their eyes were alert as if they would cut Gwain's throat without a thought if so ordered.

"It's nothing."

"Your Highness?"

"I said it's nothing."

The first prince gestured for them to leave.

“Is that Gwain?” a woman whispered just before the door closed, also saying, “We should be wary, lest we regret it later.”

“Arwen!”

As the nervous first prince shouted this and the carriage door once more opened, Gwain chewed his lip.

“Keep my orders in mind, if you don’t want to regret it for a lifetime.”

After being warned thusly, Arwen apologized to the first prince and once more closed the door.

“He’s not a kid, what are you worrying about?” someone said from outside.

The prince shook his head, and his face looked somewhat awkward.

“I apologize for using your body without permission.”

Gwain cared little about the prince’s face or words. All that was important was that the matter of his body and its ghostly phenomena was solved.

“In the future, I will ask you for permission in advance,” the prince continued.

“Do you think I’ll allow it?”

“Well, even if you really hate it, I can’t help you. They pop out at will, and I can do nothing about that. They don’t listen to me.”

“What do I have to do to let it leave me?”

“I am not a priest. How can I answer that.”

“So if I go to a priest, this matter will be resolved?”

“I wager that if you go to a temple and ask their help, the priests will try to bake or boil or roast you whole. They say that an unclean body must be burned.”

As Gwain kept talking with the first prince, his fear gradually subsided.

He listened to the first prince's casual chatter and wondered if it was really as big a problem as he had made it out to be. According to the prince, the loss was negligible and the profit considerable. Of course, Gwain didn't believe that, but he tried to believe it.

"Is there anything else I need to know?"

The prince thought for a moment, and then said, "Eus."

"Eus?"

"He is the youngest Royal Knight who had sacrificed himself for the king four hundred years ago. It is the name of a knight who had died as a paladin."

As Gwain stared at the prince, the prince shrugged.

"I just thought it would be good for you to know the name of the person who has entered your body."

"No shit."

Even so, Gwain kept the name in his head.

His heart pounded in his breast. In his flesh was the soul one who had tried to die for his king, but had never truly died. And this being was inside a man who had ripped apart his rings for his own king.

Where else in the world would one find such a symbiotic and fitting relationship?

Gwain shook his head.

* * *

Goosebumps suddenly arose all over my body.

I watched as Gwain left the carriage. A fine wave of mana was spreading around him.

'Sshh!'

The wave disappeared as suddenly as it had appeared.

“Well?” he asked me as he tilted his head, and then closed the carriage door as he disappeared.

Left alone in the carriage, I smiled.

“I figure he might make an attempt at revenge or something.”

I grasped at the air before me with my hand, but nothing was caught. No wave of energy was felt.

“It’s too late, but still early.”

I knew: The wave has disappeared, but its deep reverberations will soon reappear in the world.

Muhunshi was originally like that.

‘Dookdookdook.’

As I was smiling to myself, someone knocked on the carriage door.

“This is Arwen.”

“Come in.”

The door opened and the short-haired Arwen entered.

She asked if she could apologize. I nodded.

“A while ago, I was presumptuous.”

It seemed that she was remorseful that she had so openly spoken of Gwain.

“You didn’t even hear everything we talked about.”

“My heart was like a chimney. My emotions rose without pause.”

“So you blame your heart?”

“If Your Highness had not stopped me, I would have said…”

I had responded casually to Arwen, but only now could I properly see her face.

“You seem to have something else to say?”

I was serious before, but now I beckoned for her to join me, as I saw how utterly serious she was.

As Arwen sat on the bench opposite me, she looked into my eyes.

“Your Highness, I would like Your Highness to rest a little, to relax. To lighten your load.”

“My load?”

“Aren’t you carrying too many things on your own shoulders?”

“If this is about Gwain and-“

“It’s not just that.”

She was talking about my life in general and my overall attitude. She said that I could not afford to enjoy any free time as I was trying to do too many things on my own. That was why she believed me to be in jeopardy.

There was certainly a certain truth to her words.

Since I had become a human being, where did my initial plans to enjoy life to its fullest go?

Day by day, breath by breath, I was living for the independence of the kingdom as my only earthly goal.

“Have you even spent time just to relax for a moment lately?”

I pondered her question, and I realized: I don’t do anything for myself.

Really? Yes, not even a single thing!

“Since Count Balahard was killed, everything had gotten worse. Won’t you stop pushing yourself so much?”

Arwen looked at me, her face sad. It wasn't an emotion that I could comprehend.

Fight. Get stronger. Lay the foundation for an independent Leonberg.

I knew the time I had spent had never been without meaning.

"People cannot live that much! Humans don't live so intensely."

I had done right, so why does Arwen keep saying that I am wrong?

I really didn't understand, so I just frowned.

* * *

Arwen looked at the First Prince.

He had tilted his head, as if he was listening to a story that was hard to follow. As she looked at him, something welled up from inside of her.

There was something wrong with this young prince.

She didn't know it for sure until she had broken through the wall, just now. It had always been enough for her just to follow the prince and watch his back.

But she noticed the truth only after they had crossed the border. She realized what a great burden the prince was carrying on his shoulders. How much he was overworking himself.

He was always rushing forward, looking ahead.

Prince Adrian ran ceaselessly as if stopping was a sin.

As she thought about it now, the first prince has always been like that. Always at the forefront of battle – didn't he seek out the toughest of fights? He fought so fiercely, giving little heed to his own safety.

He lived on with large and small wounds until he finally suffered a fatal injury in the battle against the Warlord. He was rescued, escaping only with his life.

The prince had woke up after that and had crawled through pools of blood with his

injured body after he had punished the neglectful northern lords by his own hand.

He had held meetings for days on end to restore the north, all the while not taking care of his body. When he was able to wield his sword again, he headed straight to the battlefield.

Prince Adrian had seemed to assume that the death of Count Balahard and the fall of Winter Castle had been his fault. He had been a boy of only sixteen at the time and yet wanted to do everything alone. It was the same now.

They did not know what would happen once they entered the imperial capital. The emperor could prove fickle and suddenly annihilate the entire delegation, and no one would protest their deaths.

The prince could not be sure about the future. If he had known that they would be safe, he would never have instructed the stealthy elves to keep the gathered military intelligence safe if worst came to worst.

The first prince must surely be expecting that, whatever was about to happen in Hwangdo, it would be strange, and death a possibility.

Before they had come close to the imperial capital, the prince had devoted all his energy to studying the empire's knights and had suffered the complaints and shouts of a man who wasn't even loyal to him.

A delegation of three hundred humans was clinging to a young man, not yet an adult, and no one found this strange.

They didn't even know how to be ashamed. Of course, Arwen has been the same as them until a while ago. It might be that the prince was offering himself up for the sake of future generations, but if he continued like this, Arwen thought that he would be drained until he could neither stand nor speak.

"If Count Bale Balahard was here now, he would've said the same as I," Arwen energetically said as she looked at the prince, who still gazed at her with an inscrutable expression.

"You have done well, so take a break for a bit."

The prince remained silent. It was only after a long time that he spoke.

“You mean I’m too hasty? I’ll keep your words in mind, Arwen. I must take it easy. Do you think Vincent will give me the same advice?”

Arwen could only sigh as she heard his mischievous answer. For today, she guessed that she had to retreat from this battle of wills. It was not a problem that could be solved in a short time.

“Then, have a peaceful night, Your Highness.”

“You too, Arwen.”

She lowered her head and left the carriage.

“Well?” Arwen demanded as she saw the knights who had gathered around the carriage.

They all had heavy faces, and hurriedly avoided her gaze whenever she made eye contact. Their faces were full of shame.

Arwen pretended not to notice.

It seemed that they had all overheard the conversation that she had with the prince. On her part, she thought that it had gone rather well.

The encamped delegation was exceptionally quiet that night. Only the footsteps of a woman who worried about her master were heard as she paced before his carriage all night long.

A bright day dawned.

“Then, let’s go!”

As soon as the first prince’s order was given, the delegation set out toward the imperial capital. Their ranks were more ordered than ever, and the knights all had sharp eyes.

A giant, sprawling fortress appeared in the distance. Soon after it was sighted, a party of horsemen rode out of its gate. They were the cavalry of the imperial capital’s garrison.

“From now on, do not fail to be alert for even a moment!” the deputy commander of the Templar Knights commanded sharply. The knights’ anticipation rose and their eyes deepened.

Arwen stood near the carriage, and so did Carls Ulrich, Adelia, and the two elves.

The imperial cavalry arrived at the fore of the delegation, all the while throwing and receiving piercing glances.

“We will escort you to the imperial palace!”

Under their guidance, the delegations finally entered Hwangdo, the capital of the empire.

Five months and fifteen days had passed since they had crossed the border.

# CHAPTER 122
# BRONZE DREAM (3)

The delegation had to walk for quite a while after passing through the gate.

Even though we marched through the wide streets and up great inclines for almost half a day, the distant imperial palace never got any closer.

If it was natural, then it was natural. Because of my presence, the imperial knights were toying with us. The knights serving as our guides surely knew the way, and despite the existence of a clear road that right up to the imperial palace, they lead us round and round.

No longer able to bear it, Siorin Kirgayen asked the imperial knight why he was leading us in circles. The knight's answer to the count was indeed spectacular.

He said that since I had never before visited Hwangdo, he decided to give us a tour of the spired city. He then went on to say we should take in all the sights as well as we could. His behavior was patronizing, as if he was giving a gaggle of rural villagers a tour of the city.

Still, we were there as representatives from the kingdom, and it was as it was. He was rude, but we couldn't be rude in turn.

I prevented the fuming Siorin from voicing an official protest against the imperial knight. I didn't have the energy for a childish diplomatic scuffle.

I urged my companions to keep the shame of this day in their hearts and not on their tongues.

Upon hearing my words, the attitude of the discontented knights suddenly changed. The Templars, who had donned their helms, were no longer shaken. And as the occasional provocation came from the imperial knights, no one responded in the slightest.

"This is the middle of the enemy's city, don't forget that."

“Be alert.”

The Templars constantly reminded each other that they were among enemies and should stay focused on the mission.

The knight of the empire, who had been leading the delegation around, became tired of his games.

“Ah, we have to go around this bend.”

The impudent knight finally led us onto the main road again, and we were finally able to ascend on the sloping road that led to the imperial palace.

It was only then that the true humiliation began.

While we walked along that great avenue, the citizens of Hwangdo came up and started laughing at us. They treated our delegation like a troop of country bumpkins and laughed at our weather-beaten appearance.

“Oh hoh! Come now, they are precious people from another country! Do you fail to see this fact because it’s dark? Act like wise citizens of the empire, friends!”

The knight was pretending to defend us, but the true effect of his words was to further draw out the mockery of the imperial citizens.

“Go into the carriage, Your Highness,” Siorin advised me, incensed by the spectacle. He said there was no reason for me to be an object of their ridicule. Instead of answering him, I called the imperial knight to me and asked for his name.

“What do you want to do with the name of this lowly knight?” the knight asked, and I noticed him shuddering.

“Thanks to you, I was able to see the Yellow City of Hwangdo, every corner of it, so I have to repay you later for the fine tour.”

“I was not hoping for any reward, but if you would give it, I am Rouen of the Yvesinth family.”

Somehow, I had suspected that the man who had made our entrance to the capital so difficult was affiliated with the Marquis of Yvesinth.

“Good. Rouen of the Yvesinth family, I will surely remember that name.”

Rouen laughed at me. I could see in his eyes that he was in no way scared of a prince from a small country.

After we had walked for a long time as Rouen led us, I finally caught my first glimpse of the imperial palace.

“Leonberg’s delegation will stay in the fifteenth palace. When the first scheduled event begins, I will deliver you all a separate message, so you are free to rest until then.”

The imperial courtier who had met us had made a cursory greeting and then immediately took care of business.

“There seems to be some error. We are not merely a sub-country delegation, there is a royal personage in our retinue. Please check again,” Siorin told the courtier.

The man pretended to scan the list, and then replied with a gloomy face, “There is no mistake. The Leonberg mission is in palace fifteen.”

Then, as if we were a mere annoyance that he had dealt with, the courtier turned away and disappeared into a corridor.

“Your Highness, I’m sorry. It’s all due to a lack of communication,” Siorin apologized to me as he explained the situation.

Burgundy’s imperial palace complex had a total of twenty-five palaces. The emperor resided in one, and the rest of the imperial family in nine others. The fifteen remaining palaces are said to exist for aristocrats, as they were quite lower on the imperial hierarchy.

“It’s better to have a quiet palace because then you won’t have to get involved with the imperial nobles,” Siorin said to appease me.

“As we know Your Highness’s character, it might be safer for the high-ranking imperial nobles if we stay there.”

Erhim Kiringer’s joke made his fellow Templars laugh.

The attendant who had been guiding us was startled by such words, looked behind her, and soon began to move on again.

* * *

The prediction that their entrance would be a quiet affair was wrong.

The hall was already crowded by those who had arrived before us. Among them, there seemed to be nobles of the empire as well as envoys from other countries.

It wasn't difficult to distinguish between the two groups.

Those who arrogantly raised their chins while staring straight at us were imperial nobles. Those who politely bowed before glancing up were obviously the foreign envoys.

"Tsu. These fools have far to fall."

I had been warned that even the lower-ranked nobles of the empire would not show the proper protocol that a prince was due.

I stepped forward and displayed myself before them.

"What, who is that?"

"He dares greet the nobles of our great empire, he who is from a small country?"

The imperial nobles had first flinched in disgust before they started to rebuke and chide me.

I smiled wide and then greeted them.

"Nice to meet you, you cowardly dogs."

I greeted them in the language of Leonberg instead of in the imperial tongue.

"What? What are you saying?"

"From his expression, it looks as if he is greeting us."

“Ha! He seems unable to speak Supreme Imperial.”

The imperial nobles had drawn their own false conclusions and were discussing me with great haughtiness.

“The arms of our great country are wide open, so I don’t know who he is, but he must go take a rest.”

I nodded, as if they had proudly greeted me, and then said, “Okay, this is my palace after all, so I’ll think about it.”

Once more, I had spoken in the language of Leonberg.

“But where the hell is their envoy!?” the imperial nobles exclaimed.

Even when they had seen the symbol of the golden lion on my chest, they had merely tilted their heads, unsure whether I had a low rank in the kingdom or not.

I wasn’t interested in such gaps in their knowledge.

I glanced at the attendant once more, and she swiftly guided us to the farther reaches of the fifteenth palace.

“These accommodations are truly luxurious.”

Siorin shook his head at my brief and sarcastic appreciation of our assigned lodgings.

“The plaque of the Marquis of Montpellier doesn’t seem to work in the imperial palace.”

“Maybe that’s for the best.”

I had not confirmed it yet, but I knew it was intentional that we had been lodged in the furthest dorms of a lower palace.

I unpacked my luggage in the corner of the fifteenth palace that had been set out for us.

* * *

The young prince of the Dotrin Kingdom clenched his teeth.

It seemed that laughter would burst from him at any moment, as he had been caught off guard.

He pinched his thighs, and forcibly held back his laughter.

His attendant shook their head as he saw him scrunch up his mouth. He knew that his prince had a strange personality, even a delusional one. The attendant had not considered the exchange to be that big a deal.

“So, have they gone?”

“They went, Your Highness,” the attendant said, confirming that all the imperial nobles had left.

“Puh! Hahahha!”

At that moment, the young prince’s laughter burst out.

“It looks like he has broken out in laughter again,” the attendant mouthed, as if the prince was pathetic. The young prince then pleaded that they had judged him unfairly.

“No, there is a reason that I laugh alone.”

The young prince then explained in a low voice what had happened just now.

The prince then explained what the meaning of the greeting had been that the guest, recently arrived in this palace, gave to the imperial nobles.

“Is that funny?” the attendant queried.

“It’s funny. It’s even funnier if you realize that the nobles of the empire didn’t understand what he was saying to them.”

“You probably learned the Leonberg language wrong if you heard it that way,” the attendant warned in a low tone, clucking his tongue, and added, “Keep your voice low. You never know who’s listening.”

“Listening in on us? Who? They wouldn’t even understand us,” the prince quipped.

None of the imperial nobles, who cared only for the affairs of the empire, had learned the languages of the small countries. They did not consider it necessary.

If there were those that spoke such tongues, they weren’t in this palace.

The attendant was momentarily convinced, so he changed the subject.

“Rather, are the rumors true regarding the head of the Leonberg delegation?”

“There are many families that use lions in their heraldry, but only one which uses a lion astride over a dragon: The Leonberg royal family.”

“Indeed!” the greatly impressed attendant cried admirably as the prince gave him his reply.

“For a man who had many victories against the knights of the empire, his posture seemed fitting.”

“I don’t know enough about swordsmanship,” the attendant admitted.

“Me neither, but I have eyes, and I can study people.”

“Is it his normal posture, though? How do you know he’s a skilled guy if you don’t even know swo-“

“No, he wasn’t just pretending to be handsome. It’s probable that he knows the art of the sword well.”

The prince from Dotrin had laughed, but he quickly took on a serious face.

“It looks like the martial life has been stamped firmly into him. Rumor also has it that a high-ranking imperial noble looks after him, but still, he has been assigned accommodation in the fifteenth palace, a place for lesser envoys.”

“We are such trembling, lesser envoys, then?”

The prince politely ignored the attendant’s statement and continued talking.

“Considering all of this, it didn’t look like he regretted his past actions.”

“I’m just telling Your Highness, don’t tremble for no reason.”

“It’s crazy. It all seems such a big deal, once you get caught up in it.”

“Can you believe that?” the attendant asked with wide eyes as he looked at the prince.

“What do you see me as!?” the prince exclaimed as he jumped up, adding that he was being treated unfairly.

* * *

“It is an honor to meet the protagonist of such juicy rumors.”

A young man with light-brown hair had suddenly appeared while I had taken a walk to breathe in the cool night’s breeze. He greeted me in fluent Leonbergian language.

“I am Doris Dotrin, from the Dotrin Kingdom,” the small, boyish man introduced himself with a smile. “And this is my attendant, Jin.”

As I stared quietly at the both of them after such an outrageous greeting, Doris had told me his servant’s name without me even asking him to.

“It is the honor of a lifetime to meet the heir of the Leonberg throne. I am Jin, of the Katrin family,” the dark-haired and sharp-faced attendant said as he bowed to me. It was only for a moment, but I was sure an unpleasant look had passed over his face. From that moment on, I knew that our meeting was coincidental, and not some scheme devised by Prince Doris Dotrin.

“Adrian Leonberger,” was all I said.

Jin’s eyebrows rose ever so slightly as he heard my curt greeting.

“His Highness Doris is twenty-six this year,” Jin stated.

“That’s a long life.”

Now I saw that Jin’s face slightly hardened at my words.

I did not understand what his intent was in telling me his master's age, and I didn't particularly feel the need to speak up. I was sure the person concerned, Dotrin, didn't care much either.

"What more do you wish to say?" I asked, pushing the boundaries.

"Can't I just say hello?" Doris asked.

"If that's all, our business is over."

"Then I must confess my innocent curiosity, as you are rumored to be a person walking the path of the sword."

Doris Dotrin's expression was now much the same as the first moment he had laid eyes on me.

He had a flawless smile, but I knew that a flawless smile is the best way to hide a darker inside, so I stayed alert. This might be the heart of the empire, but it was apt to say that the imperial palace was still a small place, and small places had many eyes and ears.

One should expect the strangest things to occur, and it was never certain when, where, and what kind of guys could jump from behind a bush to play their games and try their tricks.

I took a step back and studied the two men. I summoned the power of [Judgment] into my eyes.

"Huh?"

After I saw the status screen floating in the void, I opened my eyes.

"If you would give me the chance, I would like to see the swordplay of the famous Leonberg knights and-"

"Your Highness. They are famous, and they have swords. I'm sure you'll see them, it won't be a problem," Jin interjected.

"Then what's wrong? Why interrupt me?"

Jin furtively looked around, and then said in a low voice, “Haven’t you forgotten something?”

“No, I don’t know what you mean.”

“You aren’t dull, but you can’t learn how to use white-edge swords, yes?”

“So what do you want to say?”

“I think you got caught, Your Highness,” Jin told Doris as he looked at me.

“Ah, no way,” Doris said, looking at me as he rolled his eyes. “Oh, that’s right,” he then said as his face grew stern, “I got caught.”

Doris looked foolish then, and all three of us started to laugh.

But just because I laughed with them did not mean that we were laughing about the same thing.

On one side, there was a loud laughter that was meant to cover up deficiencies.

On the other side, there was laughter that was pure laughter, no more and no less.

Of course, my laugh fell in the latter class.

To be honest, I couldn’t even say that it was completely pure.

* * *

The third princeps was not happy at all.

He had been in such a state ever since he heard that the first prince of the Leonberg kingdom, who had made a pact of brotherhood with him, had been relegated to the fifteenth palace.

The official would never have placed the Leonberg delegation in such a lowly palace if they didn’t want them to suffer a loss of face.

It was an overt disregard and an outright provocation.

And the third princeps was not a person who would be ignored by others, and that was as true now as ever.

His limited patience had been exhausted in a mere hour, so he sprang straight into action.

“Well, Your Highness.”

The imperial courtier who now faced the third princeps was tired of his whining.

“You dare embarrass me?”

The princeps stepped forward. The courtier tried to step back, but the princeps grabbed him by the folds of his neck fat and started shaking him.

“Your Highness! It wasn’t by my will, believe me!”

“Who did it then? Tell me!?”

The princeps raised his hands, as if to slap the courtier’s cheeks, so the man closed his eyes and shouted, “Wah! It was His Majesty!”

“What?” the third prince asked with a dumbfounded expression.

Then he released his grip on the man and stepped back. He cried out and rolled onto the floor, laying flat.

“It has all been directed by His Majesty the Emperor, Your Highness!”

“So you’re saying that His Majesty directly assigned those lodgings to the Leonberg delegation?”

“Would I be safe if I lied to Your Highness? Trust me!” the imperial courtier cried out at the princeps how lay on the floor.

“Why?” The third princeps could not understand it.

A dozen missions from dozens of kingdoms visited each year.

The emperor had never cared about them in the slightest.

# CHAPTER 123
# THE WEAVER AND DESCENDANTS OF THE WEAVER (1)

The two men had been shouting in low voices.

They spoke neither in Supreme Imperial nor in Leonbergian.

If they spoke in one of the aforementioned tongues, they would have taken greater care for me not to overhear them. If they had known me to have the power of [Third Ear], allowing me to eavesdrop, as well as centuries of knowledge as a sword, they would have been more modest in their talk.

But alas, they were unaware of this.

“That’s why I’m not trembling. Will it be still a while?”

“Is that important right now?”

They were sharing their secrets in my presence.

“Looking at him, I noticed it. I’m not sure though, so let’s stop it.”

“That’s the way it is now.”

“Is there a better way?”

“No.”

“Then you can do it? Or must I?”

After talking for some time, the two men finally reached a conclusion and looked at me.

“It was nice to meet you. Let’s talk again next time we get a chance to.”

“We have held onto Your Highness for long enough, and we might have been rude.”

After hurriedly saying goodbye, they turned around, wishing to leave.

I had no intention of letting them escape.

“What? Are you going already? You said you would like to meet our knights.”

“After I thought about it, it doesn’t seem polite to bother people who have just arrived, not having had time to rest. You and the knights will need to take a break after your travels.”

“No? Okay. But if you want, we have time right now.”

“Ah, no matter then… Huh?”

Doris Dotrin was befuddled, his eyes wide.

“But you speak our language?”

They only then noticed that I was speaking in their language.

“It’s uncommon for people to know our tongue,” Jin Katrin said in admiration as he touched his forehead.

“Stupid prince Dotrin – and I mean it now.”

Hi bit his lip, and his words were full of resentment.

* * *

When we returned to the dorm, I asked the knights to be on the lookout and immediately walked into my room and locked the door. Then I seated myself across Prince Dotrin and his attendant.

The prince was distracted as he studied my room, while Jin was staring at me with a puzzled look.

He was surely wondering how much I knew.

And since I wasn't in a hurry to talk about it, I made up my mind and changed the subject.

"What can I call you?" I asked. I knew that the personage of Doris Dotrin, a prince from a small country that didn't even know which side of a shoe was the forward-facing one, was nothing but a disguise.

"Can I call you Your Highness Dorothes Dortmund?"

The moment that the true name of the prince was uttered, as well as the ancient name of the Dotrin family, Dortmund, energy suddenly flared up in the room.

'Pwoo!'

The hidden mana summoned by Jin Katrin surrounded me.

'Schuuk!'

Gunn's blade touched Jin's throat as she appeared from her hiding place.

"You're driving me crazy. You even have fucking elves," Jin grumbled as he stared at Gunn and her sword upon his throat. "What on earth are you?" Jin demanded.

"Whatever my identity is, it isn't as surprising as that of your prince," I replied as I glanced at Jin, and then looked at Doris.

The prince hadn't been surprised by Gunn's sudden appearance, and even with her sword at his man's neck, he didn't seem the least bit agitated. On the contrary, it seemed as if Doris believed himself capable of saving Jin from death if the need arose.

And it was true: The stupid-looking prince had that ability.

This was because the Dortmunds, now the Dotrins, were elven nemeses.

In the past, humans had been nothing but livestock to the non-human races.

Agnes Bavaria wielded her iron-blooded sword to kill the Giant King Eda, liberating the northern lands. There were four more great heroes in that time who had achieved equal feats, all of them being the Five Predecessors.

The prince before me was one of their descendants, a hero who led the Knights of the Sky, who were a hundred wyvern riders.

That great knight had forced the arrogant elves to wield bows instead of swords and made them fear the sky and hide in the lush forests.

[The Sky Blade, Umbert Dortmund]: Doris was the blood heir of that great warrior.

Unlike Adelia Bavaria, who had forgotten her family's roots and traditions, here was a descendant who had almost completely inherited the feats and traditions of his ancestors.

Of course, this doesn't mean that he had reached the same [Mythic] level as his ancestor. Nevertheless, he still had the traits of Umbert, up to a certain level.

This alone was enough for him to tear up Gunn.

I didn't want anyone, human or elf, to suffer such a death, so I ordered Gunn to withdraw her blade and step back.

Gunn did so and quickly disappeared. Jin Katrin, once freed, asked me, "Putting aside the question of how you knew our identity, what do you want from us?"

I answered him in a straightforward manner.

"The enemy of my enemy might be my ally. So, let's join forces. If we can give each other aid in the future, let's do so."

Jin discarded his last vestiges of pretense after he heard my words.

"I think it would be better for us to make your plans known to the empire, giving us a reasonable advantage."

I snorted at Jin's words. It was the dumbest thing I'd heard since waking up, and the least funniest joke of them all. I knew how empty his words were.

Even if all the kingdoms on the continent fell flat before the empire; even if Leonberg lost its will to resist and submitted; I knew that there existed four families that would never bow before the emperor.

These were the ancient guardian families of north, south, east, and west, including the Dotrins.

For them, the emperor was only worthy of being torn apart and his flesh thrown to the dogs to feast upon. There once was a hero from the Burgundy family, who became the first insurrectionist lord on the continent. He was termed 'The one who came after foresight.'

After the Great War, Ganwoong Burgundy broke the oath of the elite electors and put the peace and prosperity of an entire continent in ashes.

He was the first great human who chose to wage war on his fellow humans.

For a descendant of Umbert Dortmund to stand on the side of those of Ganwoong Burgundy was inconceivable, unbelievable, impossible.

The words Jin Katrin had spoken deserved only scorn.

"True. Our interests are aligned," the descendant of the Sky Blade quietly said.

The persona of the foolish and stupid prince no longer existed. Here was a man who had inherited the fury of the sky from his ancestors.

"It is true, we know that our purpose is not different from his."

At the words of his prince, Jin humbly bowed his head and said, "I was guarding the heritage and actions of a family that has always been overly secretive. please forgive me."

"I understand. Without such thoughtfulness and prudence, you would never have been able to reach Hwangdo safely. There is nothing to blame."

The prince had been listening to me sternly, and then said, "The enemy of our enemy is our ally."

"Or maybe we can even be comrades."

Doris shook his head at my words.

"I know a much better word for it," the prince said with a grin as he reached out to

me.

“Let’s be friends.”

I grasped his hand without hesitating.

Even though the concept of friendship was unfamiliar to me, it was more than enough to become the comrade of the descendant of the Sky Blade.

“We are friends now.”

The prince shook my hand.

“Secret friends that the empire is unaware of.”

Even though it was such a good moment, all the words sounded so unfamiliar to me. I held onto his hand without knowing why.

* * *

The descendant of Umbert was serious for a bit, but his face quickly took on the easy-going appearance that it had on our initial meeting. He entrusted all further matters to his attendant.

It was through Jin that I learned their true reasons for visiting the empire, and those reasons were no different than mine.

They wished to overheat the successional contest between the principes and so sow chaos in the empire. They had also settled upon the third princeps to be the wellspring of the confusion.

After all, it seemed that anyone like that seemed a good way to cripple the empire.

The only problem was that not only we had realized this. The emperor and his nobles also knew the traits of the third princeps, and that his ascension would mean the ruin of the realm.

Jin pointed that fact out to me.

He was skeptical about all the practical possibilities, even if he would be happy if the

empire would self-destruct was the third princeps to rise to power. Still, the boy couldn't play the game for the throne all that well, and would probably be quietly purged by his brothers.

Jin was correct. Only if someone supported him could the third princeps become the empire's disaster. Unfortunately, those who served them did not seem like great men who could plant their princeps' banner atop the palace.

If the situation turned against them, they would betray him without a thought, and when someone paid them for the head of their master, they would deliver it.

Both Niccolo and Jin told me that they would start thinking up countermeasures.

I knew how to fight with valor upon the field of battle. Fighting from the shadows with schemes and tricks was not to my taste.

There were experts around me that were suited to such work, and so I left it all in their hands.

Swords belong in the hands of warriors. Let the assassins grip the daggers, the schemers their pens, and the diplomats their tongues.

On one side I had Niccolo Marchiadel and Siorin Kirgayen, and on the other, Jin Katrin.

Entrusting the covert work to them, I devoted myself to my own very important duty.

"Bring me a drink!"

I played the idiot who disrespected his hosts, forgetting that they were a powerful realm.

Day after day, I fooled around and caused a fuss.

The imperial nobles pointed at me in disgust, but they didn't come over and scold my behavior. The power of Montpellier's name still had value, but greater still was the support of my new imperial brother.

"Wow! Remember this day, brother! Even though you now stay in the fifteenth palace, I will ensure that you get moved to the tenth palace later."

The third princeps, without prior arrangement, came and laid back with me.

If I had been on my own, I would have drunk moderately and raised my voice as an act. Thanks to the princeps visiting each day, I was able to properly put up my facade of debauchery.

Vandalism was a mere bonus of my sublime, drunken performance.

“Your Highness’s notoriety spreads throughout the imperial palace,” Carls informed me with a disapproving face, saying that my excesses were now common gossip.

Still, I drank like a dog; acted like a fool who did not know the reality of things, who did not know that Montpellier controlled the whole of Leonberg.

The knights had become very displeased by my reputation, and they regretted that I was doing things that did not fit my noble temperament.

It wasn’t a hard act at all.

The liquor I drank without tasting it anymore started to flow down my throat at a greater rate, and as I kept hitting the bottle, my stress was relieved and my worries floated away on drunken clouds.

I even started to feel addicted to that strange pleasure of indulgent liberation.

“Arwen, this is what you said,” I told her with some excitement in the midst of my partying. Arwen was confused.

“Never say it,” she said, and rebuked by her stern reply, I lit up a cigar.

Living like a human was a difficult thing for me, but of course, that was not important at all right now. Even though I usually enjoyed cleaner pleasure than this base entertainment, I didn’t slow down. I constantly reminded myself that this was the right place and time.

Even if I tried to forget myself, I couldn’t.

There were so many hidden eyes that monitored by every move. How could I ever forget the truth of my situation?

After two weeks of acting like an idiot for those invisible spies, the drunken third princeps told me an unusual story. The reason our delegation had been relegated to the fifteenth palace was that the emperor himself had commanded it to be so.

I realized something the moment I heard that: Even if Leonberg had been trampled; even if we had been driven to the point where we could not resist; even if the kingdom had been backed into a corner——the emperor still hasn't lowered his guard.

He was a thorough person and kept a tight reign on his power. He was also a cunning schemer. As the drunken third princeps told me all these things, I started to get an idea as to the emperor's plans. It was a masterpiece that I could now see clearly.

The emperor must be curious to see how I would handle it, and I knew if I curled my tail like a coward dog, he would laugh at me.

If I bared my teeth like a wolf, he would rush to pull them from my maw.

He had considered all the possibilities regarding me and had set up contingencies.

The same counted for me; I had also come up will all sorts of tricks and tactics.

Among them was the situation that I had now crafted through the weeks.

I had kept my discovered answers closed to my breast. Whether my moves were right or wrong would only be known over time. That time wasn't long in coming.

The new year's banquet was fast approaching.

And then the day finally dawned.

It was the same as in Leonberg: Those of lower rank entered first, so I, as a denizen of palace fifteen, was there very early along with the delegation.

Nobles stared at me as if I was but a monkey in a cage. I waited for the emperor to appear.

"Huhuhm."

After the Marquis of Yvesinth, who stared at me with hate, entered, the attendant

cleared his throat and then made an announcement that should be rights have ruptured his throat.

“Emperor Ortega de Burgundy and his family, the magnificent ruler of Burgundy, nobler, wiser, and more compassionate than anyone else, will now enter!”

The atmosphere froze in the banqueting hall. Everyone bowed, including me.

‘Jkikiff, jirkiff,’

I heard footsteps approaching.

It had been clearly announced that the entire Burgundy family would enter together, yet I could only hear a single set of footfalls.

The nearer the footsteps, the more rapid my breath. My body felt aflame.

However, before I really did burst into flames, the energy dissipated and my mind flashed.

Only then did I realize that someone was firmly holding my hand. A hand smaller and softer than that of other knights.

“Thanks, Arwen.”

“It’s nothing.”

Her hand slipped away.

The footsteps of the emperor, which had sounded nearby, had once more receded.

A low-key voice announced, “Everyone can lift their heads.”

As I straightened my back, I looked straight up at the dais.

There was the Emperor of Burgundy.

# CHAPTER 124
# THE WEAVER AND DESCENDANTS OF THE WEAVER (2)

He was a man who suited the title of Emperor so well. My first appraisal of him was that of a man with arrogant eyes and a determined expression, and with a strong temperament. When I studied him further, he looked soft and kind, and then infinitely malicious. In one moment, he looked like an educated scholar; in the next, like a valiant general.

It looked as if all the virtues of a monarch had coalesced into a single man.

It was surprising that a single human being could have such a colorful and shifting face.

Still, I've already encountered humans like him in the time that I had been a sword.

I remember the founder of the Burgundy empire who had wielded his sword, and the current emperor looked surprisingly similar to his ancestor.

His look, his aura, his very presence.

The nobles had been unable to breathe properly the moment that the emperor had appeared. The same held true for the mighty dukes and renowned marquis.

They did not dare look directly at the dais, even after they had straightened their waists. There were so many people in the hall, and all of them were overwhelmed by the emperor.

It was a situation that I could not understand.

Theirs was not coercion enforced by power, but a natural surrender to a human who had reached a higher level of existence. It's something that could be called transcendence. Most who had inherited feats from their ancestors had not done so in full. Even the descendant of Umbert, who had inherited his forebear's traits almost in

full, could not face the emperor.

It seems that only the emperor had reached such a high place that he could look down on the world.

Numerous questions ran through my head.

I couldn't find an answer as I faced his power. This meant that the spirit and strength of the emperor's soul had never been lesser than mine. All that remained was to see with my own eyes and discover the reason for his greatness.

Fortunately, there was plenty of time.

The new year's party had just begun, and it would take a long time for the delegation of our small country to appear before the emperor.

I thought I would be able to find a solution, but my expectations proved wrong.

Although an imperial duke had not finished his greeting, the emperor suddenly mentioned our delegation. "Leonberger's mission has come to my realm. Where are they?"

It was not really a question, as his gaze was already fixed on us.

No, to be more precise, on me. A tremendous feeling of coercion was crushing my will. It felt as if the entire world was pressing in on me. It felt as if something in me wanted to kneel down and worship as if a force was constantly commanding me to obey. I struggled under that terrible pressure. There was nothing I could do to resist it.

The emperor's nature was certainly unusually powerful for this era. Still, it was not overwhelming enough to force me onto my knees, even if I looked at him.

If I truly had to endure it, I had confidence in my ability to withstand it——even if the emperor poured out all the power in his body.

But I didn't use my power as a Sword Master, nor the karma and spirit that I had accumulated over the centuries.

I faced the emperor's power with only my body. My eyes spun in their sockets, my

legs trembled.

“Oooha,” a moan escaped from my lips. I knew that in the eyes of others, I must look weak, beaten.

That was acceptable. It would be better if the nobles of the empire saw me as a weaker man who was overwhelmed by the majesty of their emperor.

“Come stand before my throne.”

I went to stand before the dais, pretending to obey the emperor’s words. It was now that the true trial began. Even as the delegation and I stood before the emperor, he held his silence for a long time.

I just stared before me, as if with vacant eyes. I hid my being and endured being before him, not leaking a single speck of my energy, not revealing a sliver of my true emotions.

How much time has passed?

By the time the imperial nobles and delegations from other countries questioned the emperor’s bizarre behavior, the pressure that had pressed against me was relieved, like a snapping rope.

At that moment, my body was a mess. Such was the price of facing the power of one who had transcended——with only my body.

I almost staggered and stopped myself from doing so with great force of will. I was exhausted after facing the emperor’s power. Still, I managed to maintain my body’s momentum.

‘Swish,’ the emperor gestured with his hand, signaling us to go back to our places.

My knights supported me as I stumbled out of the banqueting hall.

That was merely the beginning.

The new year’s festival would last for 15 days.

Our delegation had to attend a banquet every day.

It wasn't by my own choice; no, the emperor sent a messenger who asked us to attend each and every day. Such was the will of the emperor.

Emperor Ortega came in each day, summoning our delegation before him. He never spoke a word, just watching us. Then he would shake his hand and lower the power that he exuded. Siorin didn't even have time to offer him the tribute that we had lugged from the kingdom.

We were treated in such a manner. It was a test from a suspicious emperor and punishment for insulting the knights of the empire.

Emperor Ortega hadn't only inherited Ganwoong's power, for his personality also resembled that of his ancestor. On the exterior, he acted noble and imperious, but in reality, he had inherited a petty and scheming soul.

Damned emperor.

Thanks to him, I had become the laughing stock of the imperial nobles.

Some nobles said that it was a fitting punishment for the knights who had dared defeat the knights of the empire, whilst others said that I was being punished for flaunting the support of a high-ranking imperial noble without knowing the true circumstances.

"Your Highness must have caught His Majesty's eye."

Some noble even congratulated me for the interest the emperor showed in me.

Regardless of it all, I focused on my mission. Whenever I was in the banqueting hall, I continued to observe the people of the empire. I studied who was capable and incapable; who was loyal or instead was blinded by self-interest. I cared little for who they were; I just randomly checked the status screens of imperial nobles, making a list of them.

The information I gathered I handed over to Niccolo Marchiadel, who sorted them by collating the data. Who would aid the kingdom, and who would threaten it. Who would side with the third princeps, and who would use him as a puppet. No matter how much I thought about it, it seemed an unlikely prospect for the 'imperial disaster' to blossom into a full destructive force by gaining the throne. Even the fifth princeps, who was judged to be as far from the succession of the throne as the third

princeps, had already developed his abilities and formed a power base around himself.

However, Niccolo and Jin Katrin thought differently.

They said that the other principes couldn't hide their superiority, so the stupid third princeps would have a chance. None of the principes would care about the third princeps.

We would be able to ignite conflict between the principes if we had the right agents and positioned them correctly. The question was how to make the principes, a fool, gain support for his cause. I left that matter for the scholars to figure out.

I focused solely on dealing with the emperor, the emperor who constantly dominated me while I did nothing in turn.

When the emperor's power was unleashed, it pressed me back completely, and when it was pulled back, its magnitude was understood by its very absence. When it shook more than usual, I stumbled.

The banquet was now on the fifth day. In the meantime, many visitors came to me in palace fifteen.

Among them were the second and fifth principes. They asked me to support them instead of the third princeps. Of course, what they really wanted was the support of the Marquis of Montpellier, not that of some small country.

I was willing to oblige their request. I had to sell Montpellier's name in the process, which I had already sold to the third princeps. I sold it twice more, and I cared not. It was Montpellier's problem, not mine.

Two days passed. Once it was a full moon, the last banquet would be held. If I could last for but a day more, this clown show would be over.

The nobles of the empire openly ridiculed me and the delegation when they saw us.

Some of them mocked us by saying we would be going home after being embarrassed after we had gained a little bit of fame. Others said that we came here to defeat a few knights, but had lost the dignity of our country in the process, and maybe its liberty.

I snorted. There was no kingdom for them to conquer anyway, for it was a kingdom that has long since been wrecked by the empire. It was a great shame, but still, I had already achieved the purpose of my visit to the empire. I had experienced the empire with my own senses and had caught a glimpse of the emperor's true nature. That was success enough, but I had even succeeded in forming an alliance with the third princeps. Additionally, I had met the descendant of the Sky Blade, Doris.

No matter what the nobles said, I had gained everything I had wanted to gain from the empire and had lost nothing. All that remained was to leave the empire at my own leisure after this damnable circus would end.

However, things in this reality usually did not play out as we expected them to do.

Such was the exact case now.

"Please, I hope you will return safely to Leonberg."

Everything had been the same, except for the kind words spoken by an emperor who had been completely silent. At that moment, a feeling of foreboding came over me.

I instructed Siorin to leave the hall.

"Get away from the capital, and take only what you need."

"Your Highness, why the sudden-"

"I have a bad feeling about this."

Instead of explaining, I urged him to make all haste.

Siorin prepared the delegation to leave Hwangdo without telling anyone, despite the oddity of my orders. When I heard that all the plans were in order, I headed back to the main palace.

Doris Dotrin did not greet me; we simply exchanged glances from a distance. I made a covert gesture. As I glanced at him, Doris just blinked. Jin Katrin, who had been watching me, approached, then nodded after I spoke to him.

"Your Highness, what the hell is this about?" a knight asked me as we traveled on the road in the dead of night.

“The emperor is planning something.”

“What the hell is-“

“That’s exactly it, I don’t know. I bet it isn’t something that will benefit us on our journey home.”

We had abandoned the wagons and carriages, so even old Niccolo had fled the capital on a horse. We relied on the moonlight to see our way, and we had been on the road for a while. The sound of riders suddenly sounded from behind us. Soon enough, heavily-armored knights appeared.

Their white armor shone so clearly at night, and their helmets were shaped into the heads of hawks.

“Highness! Those are the White Hawk Knights!”

They were one of the orders that had been devastated by the Templars.

“Where are you going so urgently?” one of the knights demanded in a clear voice as he blocked our way, having ridden a route that took him around our group.

“If you are true knights, don’t refuse our challenge!”

The instant I heard that I knew: This is just the beginning. The White Hawk Knights wanted revenge for their defeat. Still, they wanted more than that. I knew that they weren’t the only knights that would block our way in the future.

All the knights we had humiliated in the past six months would soon seek us out.

There could be no protest from us, for they had a valid justification.

“I will not accept rejection!”

As we had challenged them, they too deserve to challenge us.

The imperial knights who blocked our way had formed an assault formation and had drawn their swords. The murder and malice in their bearing was clear to see.

“Your Highness! On your order!” Erhim Kiringer requested as he took the lead.

I did not hesitate.

“All into battle formation!”

If the knights had come here on a new year’s resolution, our resolution was to gain another victory.

“It’s on now, boys!”

“Ha!”

The Templars lowered their visors as one.

# CHAPTER 125
# I WILL COME BACK AFTER FIXING THE MESS (1)

Arwen wanted to take the lead, but everyone held her back. She had only recently woven her fourth ring, and the bonds between her rings were not yet firm. She had to refrain from expending mana as much as possible.

Still, Arwen felt determined. She was a sword that wanted to be used when it was needed, and she said that she would learn what to do by doing it.

Facing her resolve, the Templars sighed and stepped back.

“Arwen,” I called as I neared her, and she turned to me.

“Don’t do overkill.”

Arwen smiled as she bowed her head.

‘Sheelkop!’

“Then, I’ll go first.”

Having said that, she gripped her horse’s reigns after drawing her longsword and charged ahead.

‘Gwoo-ooh-ooh!’

Great energy began to swirl around her.

“It’s a paladin!” the imperial knights shouted as they rode to close the gap.

However, before they could retreat, the power of a Sword Master came down upon them.

‘Klang!’

Her Aura Blade sliced clean through the legs of horses as she rode headlong into the fray.

“She’s reached synthesis!”

The swifter knights were able to leap from their crippled mounts. Still, although they had avoided falling, they could not avoid the Templars that charged in after Arwen.

‘Klang! Klang!’

The imperial knights were beaten back by the Templars’ arcing strikes, many of them rolling awkwardly to the ground.

Still, none of them had died.

Arwen had aimed her strikes at the horses rather than the riders, and the attack of the Templars was aimed at disabling the knights rather than killing them.

None of us had spoken, but we all agreed that this was the honorable way.

We had to show a certain amount of restraint in dealing with the White Hawk knights due to their voicing a formal challenge on the first day of the new year, as well as due to the proximity of the imperial capital.

This has already been a duel before, after all, not a war.

There are those who died due to some unfortunate stray slash of a sword, or the accidental severing of an artery, or the sundering of a mana ring.

The knights who suffered such accidents just happened to be the best warriors of the White Hawk Knights. A few of them were also young knights who possessed great talent and held great future potential. I had known who the greater knights among them were, and even if their deaths were accidental, I couldn’t be happier. Really.

* * *

Upon facing Arwen’s prowess and the fierce momentum of the Templars, the White Hawk Knights soon lost their heart for battle and withdrew. Due to Arwen’s decision

to cripple their horses, chances were slim that they would pursue us at a later date.

Still, I did not feel relief.

In the first place, it was unlikely that the White Hawk Knights had truly believed that they could beat us. They surely knew that some of us had defeated paladins.

I assumed that the purpose of the White Hawk Knights had been to win some time so that the other knights could come to face us.

It should be said that their ploy was successful, to an extent.

The battle with the White Hawk Knights had not lasted long, but they had still forced our knights to exert themselves. Our horses had also faced the stress of battle, and so they had to be rested. All of us needed a break.

So, instead of running along the road all night long, we had to stop and rest.

“I never knew that the emperor would take revenge in this way,” Siorin said as he approached me while the Templars caught some rest for the following day. The emperor’s plan was a dull and sloppy masterpiece. I couldn’t agree with the emperor’s strategy, for even if he held great power, he had done things in a very imperial manner.

It had been the same in the past.

The empire always gave up its lands so easily if an enemy force pushed their lines forward. The empire had acted the same in the war against the greenskins, as well as in their war with Leonberg four-hundred years ago. However, if the enemy thought that the land they had conquered was theirs, a gift from a cowardly empire, they were soon proved dead wrong.

The empire always had the last laugh.

There was always another scheme in the making. It is not difficult to win a battle against the empire, but winning a war against them is extremely difficult.

The emperors prefer to draw their enemies deep into their territory and then wear them out rather than confront a strong, fresh enemy in open battle. The enemies of the empire have to be on their most vigilant on the retreat.

“Easy to enter, difficult to leave. That is the empire.”

Exactly like now.

“It was good that I had gone to Hwangdo and succeeded in my mission. But the real challenge has just started.”

Tomorrow will be harder than today, and the day after that, harder still.

As I warned him of such things, Siorin’s face darkened.

“If we hadn’t defeated the knights of the empire, could we have avoided the current situation?”

I shook my head at his question.

“It would have been the same.”

Siorin sighed and returned to where he had been sitting. As I studied his expression, it seemed that he held a lot of regrets about the things that had happened and are happening on our visit to the empire.

Maybe he was wondering if me hiding my abilities in front of the empire made Ortega doubt my meek facade. It was a reasonable idea, but far from the truth. I am very familiar with the Burgundy temperament. I did not doubt what the emperor saw when he looked at me.

Sure enough, since I showed none of my powers and did nothing, he was unaware of my true nature. But even if I had demonstrated a modest ability and so tried to disguise my great power, we would still not have avoided the emperor’s wrath.

I bet the emperor knew a great deal of my nature before we had even met. He must have been thinking on it all the while, weighing all the reports that reached him and the rumors regarding the Marquis of Montpellier.

The blood ancestors of Burgundy that I had known were people who constantly sought solutions to problems that worried them, but they would not hesitate to act before they had gained the answers they desired.

That is why I had hidden my true existence from him, my true colors. That way, I had

ensured that the emperor did not know who I was without me knowing that he knew.

May the paranoid emperor think more and more, for if he does, I will be able to have more time.

However, it seems that the emperor did not want to stress about the uncertainty of things for too long. That is why he had sent knights out to me at midnight, the knights that know stalked toward us.

I looked, and I laughed.

“Peakaboo! Hmmn.”

“It feels like I’m drowning.”

I was laughing because all my knights were acting as if they were asleep, all the while clutching drawn swords. A few were even talking in their faux sleep.

“Prepare yourselves without them noticing,” I whispered the order. As I did, my knights silently readied their swords.

I glanced at Jordan and his rangers, who had hidden earlier.

‘Kill?’ Jordan mouthed, and I nodded.

Unlike the White Hawk Knights, who had used a challenge as their cause, these guys were unofficial guests. It was only right for us to treat them informally.

“Now.”

One of the silent intruders was hiding in the dark as he scouted our camp. The arrow pierced his neck where he crouched.

‘Kraau,’ the intruder dropped to the ground with a mortal groan.

I then wandered through the darkness as I sought out the other uninvited guests. I swiftly decapitated one of them who had been scouting the area. I saw that the number of intruders was not very large.

There were fifteen who had approached our campsite, and five more who observed the situation from afar. The fifteen were finished off by me and the half-elves, while Jordan and his rangers made short work of the distant five.

Once I returned to the camp, everyone was sleeping in truth. When they did sleep, they slept quite well. Many of them had learned to sleep even when orcs were beneath the walls and while the chaos of battle raged.

* * *

The sun was terribly bright as I shared my conclusions with the party.

“The enemy’s target is me and the knights, not the infantry and the civilians.”

The Royal Infantry had no reason to unduly suffer while following the knights and me. I left Jordan as their leader.

“Jordan, your mission is to guide them all to the kingdom without losing a single person.”

“Yes. Is there any other way that I would do it?”

I did not doubt that Jordan would lead the Royal Infantry to safety across the border. Despite his frivolous temperament, his tracking ability was the best in the entire north.

Still, just to make sure he knew, I asked him to be careful and that he should be very careful as to the routes that he took.

“There is no reason for the bright Ranger Jordan to blunder through the same thorny paths as his lords.”

I laughed at Jordan’s cocky words, then went off with the knights.

“I cannot help but agree with the words of that ill-mannered ranger. I am with Your Highness – it is midday, and look at what kind of hardship we now face.”

This inspired complaint came from Niccolo, who held much intelligence on our enemies and was likely to be detained on the border. Contrary to his words, I could see that Niccolo was somewhat excited. The adventures he was having in his old age

seemed to please him greatly.

The aged scholar always insisted on recording events to the very end. He had several chances of escaping from Winter Castle before it fell, but he chose not to.

Maybe he was once again planning to record events that would otherwise be unknown.

I took a final glimpse at Niccolo's inspired face and then headed straight to the front of our line.

"March out!"

* * *

After the first prince had left the kingdom, the days passed. The prince who had said that he would return when he turned eighteen did not send a single letter, and all the rumors were ugly.

It was said that the imperial knights had pledged revenge against the prince and knights who had defied them, and many knights were hunting for the delegation so that they could restore their honor.

There came no good news from the delegation. Up until then, none of those in Winter Castle had been concerned about the first prince.

"What kind of person do you think His Highness is? He is the man who has survived battling against the Warlord, that's who."

"I guess so so. Anyone who says he's dead is wrong, immediately wrong. I bet we will live to see the heavenly sight of the first prince playing with his grandchildren. Of course, once he gets married."

The veteran rangers and knights who had fought with the prince in the orcish war did not doubt for a moment that he would return. Some were looking forward to hearing of his adventures in the empire once he came back to tell such tales in person. Why would someone be attacking a diplomatic delegation? Such a possibility never entered the minds of these veterans.

However, the people of Winter Castle soon became agitated when the date of the

prince's coming of age ceremony was imminent. There were already rumors that had come from the south, which said that the first prince had suffered a change.

It was said that the isolated delegation had been condemned like street dogs after the prince had recklessly fought against imperial knights. Some said that the remainders of the delegation had fled into the mountains after the rest had been slaughtered by imperial knights.

And after such rumors had spread to the north, yet another month passed.

The prince had still not returned, and the occasional rumors of him battling imperial knights were no longer heard.

By now, everyone was anxious and worried.

Then, a fresh rumor came.

It was the news that the Rangers of Balahard and the Royal Infantry who had followed the first prince into the empire had crossed the southern border and had finally reached the royal capital.

Count Vincent Balahard of Winter Castle immediately contacted the capital through the crystal ball. However, the voice Vincent heard from the sphere was not Prince Adrian's, as he had expected.

"His Highness has not returned," the imperial ambassador said, adding that the prince had split up from the soldiers, going in a different direction. Any news was cut off after that.

Hearing this news, Vincent felt as if the clear blue sky had been chased away by a gathering storm.

"He must have been delayed after fleeing from the empire's knights."

Vincent struggled to pretend that he was calm as he awaited the prince's return.

More time passed, and it was now weeks after Prince Adrian's birthday.

"I have to go to the capital myself."

Vincent decided that he could wait no longer. But contrary to his desires, he could not leave Winter Castle. He had to oversee the dwarves that were migrating while also overseeing the construction of the wizard tower by those dwarves that had already settled in. Winter was coming, and the monsters moving south had to be waylayed.

Above all else, the lords of the north, who had begun to grumble, had to be kept in check. Their bonds to Winter Castle had been strengthened by the first prince, so it wasn't strange for this alliance to start showing cracks after the prince's long absence.

The Silver Fox Mercenary Company had remained at Winter Castle after the last war due to making some kind of deal with the first prince. They now showed signs of imminent departure. When Prince Adrian had been there, they were content to just sit around, but since the prince had disappeared, they had sorely felt his absence.

It was now half a year since any news had been heard of the first prince, and the entire north had begun to crack and rumble.

# CHAPTER 126
# I WILL COME BACK AFTER FIXING THE MESS (2)

Vincent did his best to somehow fill the void, for he knew it wasn't possible for him to leave the north.

Eventually, instead of going, Vincent sent the one-eyed Quéon to the capital to hear the news.

Quéon Lichtheim, commander of the Black Lancers, headed south with a few knights. They arrived at the capital after riding night and day to find that the atmosphere in the city was tense. Many nobles were bad-mouthing the first prince for daring to defy the emperor and sully the honor of the imperial knights. Quéon met up with the Balahard Rangers who had arrived at the capital.

"After we heard the rumors that the paladins of the Marquis of Yvesinth had joined the hunt, all news regarding His Highness had stopped."

Platoon Commander Jordan made a report of their journey, speaking of the first prince.

"Where is he, Jordan?"

"All we knew was that His Highness had not returned, so we headed here straight from the imperial border."

Quéon bowed his head in shame as if being in the kingdom when the prince was in peril was a sin. He then went straight to the royal palace and asked for an audience with the king.

After waiting for two days, Quéon was finally able to meet King Lionel.

* * *

“The royal family is also seeking news from the prince, with all our might.”

The king’s face was dark as he spoke with the one-eyed northern knight.

It was a natural reaction. It was a major event when the prince of a country disappears, and he was to be found neither in his own country nor in the lands of the empire.

Nonetheless, all the king could do was trivial things, such as sending letters of protest about the unfair treatment of a diplomatic delegation that had been attacked by imperial knights.

The empire’s response to this was truly stunning.

The official imperial position was that there were no grounds on which the imperial family could intervene, as it was the knights of the kingdom who had first fielded the challenges for dueling, and had therefore given the imperial knights just cause for challenging them in turn.

Still, it was shameless and irresponsible that an official delegation and a prince had gone missing in imperial territory.

But what could the king do? It was the sin of the kingdom that it had no power and that its king was incompetent. It seemed that the king had lost all vestiges of self-confidence as he expressed himself. Quéon offered words of comfort.

“Your Majesty, your face looks haggard and ill. Please take care of yourself.”

At the knight’s words, the king touched his face. He felt that his skin was rough and dry to the touch. He knew that it was because of sleepless nights caused by great stress.

It was all because of the Marquis of Montpellier.

The marquis had been cooperating with the kingdom for a while, but he had recently begun to act suspiciously. It was said that if the empire declared war, it would be blamed on the first prince and that the nobles of Leonberg who had their pockets lined with imperial gold had received orders from the marquis.

It was now very possible that the imperial ambassador, once believed to have been

leashed, was about to change his stripes and even flee into the empire.

Some of these concerns became a reality.

A meeting was convened to determine the whereabouts of the missing mission.

“Since the seeds the prince had sown grew into the vines that tripped his feet, how can you blame this on imperial carelessness?” asked Montpellier in a subtle tone, stating that the disappearance of the delegation was solely due to the first prince’s rashness. Then, the marquis agitated some of the nobles, who began to criticize the royal family. Montpellier’s behavior was vicious, as if things had returned to the days when the kingdom was being sucked dry of its lifeblood.

Thanks to this, the rescue meeting was transformed into a carnival of slanderous jeers and shouts, denigrating the first prince and his knights.

“Stop this!”

The king had called the futile meeting to an end but then ordered the imperial ambassador to remain behind.

As soon as only the two of them were left, the marquis almost growled at the king.

“I guarantee you, if something happens to me now, the empire will demand revenge after the insults of your royal mission.”

As the king tried to reply to Montpellier’s blatant statement, the outside of the hall suddenly became noisy.

‘Bang!’

Before the king could even ask what the meaning of the tumult was, the door flew open and Nogisa Schmilde Stuttgart, the palace knight commander, entered. His Aura Blade was blazing.

“Sire! Step back! Watch out!”

The eyes of the Nogisa were fixed on the great window of the hall. The king followed his gaze and froze in shock. There was something there, a thing covered in sparkling scales.

“Well, what is that!?” King Lionel demanded.

The marquis had turned his head away as he started to step back, finally falling flat on his ass.

‘Kwraaah-ahhhhh!’ the thing outside the window screeched.

The Marquis was gibbering as he gripped his chest in fear. Staring at the marquis, the creature, a wyvern, flicked its tongue.

‘Shshshs!’

A yellow liquid flowed from the crotch of Montpellier and onto the floor.

“He’s pissed himself,” a serene voice stated, a peaceful voice. It was only then that the men, who had been overwhelmed by the wyvern’s immense presence, realized that a rider sat atop the beast.

“Who are you?!” the Nogisa demanded. The youthful jockey cleared his throat with an “Ehhem” and announced in a clear voice that he was a messenger, sent at the behest of a friend.

“Who is your friend, and what do you have to say?” the king asked the wyvern rider, pushing Count Schmilde out of the way and stepping forward.

“Prince of the Kingdom of Dotrin, commander of the Knights of the Sky, and the First Wyvern Knight, Doris Dotrin, pays his respect to the Lord of Leonberg.”

The young man’s manner of greeting was unfamiliar; the Knights of the Sky were unfamiliar: It was all unfamiliar. But what was important right now weren’t the titles that the men present never heard before.

“Personally, I’m a close friend of Adrian.”

All that was important was that Doris Dotrin was a friend of the first prince.

“The prince! Is the prince safe?” the king demanded, his tone uncharacteristically angry.

Doris smiled brightly and nodded.

“Both Adrian and the envoys are safe. They are currently carrying out a mission with my country’s Sky Knights.”

The king almost staggered to the ground in relief. He had been praying for his son’s safety, so when he heard that he was alive, all the tension uncoiled from him at once.

“But why is His Highness not returning?” the Nogisa asked on behalf of the king.

“Nice question!” Doris exclaimed as if having expected the commander to ask it. “Even if you haven’t asked it, I was about to tell you! This is Adrian’s message-,” and here Doris cleared his throat with another “Ehhem,” now speaking while mimicking a voice, “There are many things I have to do. I will come back after fixing this mess.”

Only after hearing this did the king know that this man was truly who he claimed to be, a friend of the prince. Somehow, he had perfectly imitated the arrogant and blunt manner of speech unique to Prince Adrian.

“It’s okay, he’s okay. All is fine,” the king said, greatly relieved that he now knew that the prince and the envoys were safe.

“Ah, and this is my first time in Leonberg! Can I request a guide to take me to the Marquis of Montpellier?”

“Can you tell me why you are looking for the Marquis of Montpellier?” the king asked as he glanced at the imperial ambassador.

“I also have a message for him.”

“The person right there is the Marquis of Montpellier, so if you have anything to tell him, then do so. If it’s a message that requires confidentiality, I’ll arrange for a private room.”

Doris Dotrin thought for a moment about the king’s words, then shook his head.

“Adrian didn’t say it was absolutely confidential.”

Having said that, Doris jumped from the back of his wyvern with a “Yoongcha!” and came to rest into a crouch before Montpellier, once more lowering his voice as he mimicked Prince Adrian.

“If you swear fealty to another, I will come back and step on you like the worm you are. You know this.”

The tone of the message was masterfully conveyed, reproducing the exact murderous intention of its original speaker. The Marquis of Montpellier visibly paled.

Doris’s face was pride-filled as he got up from his crouch. Even in his own opinion, he thought that his imitation of Adrian was quite good.

“Good job,” the king said as he looked at Doris, who’s appearance was somewhat that of a child begging for praise. “You have worked hard.”

“I didn’t mean to get complimented.”

Once more, the king laughed as he looked at Prince Doris Dotrin, a man whose actions were radically different than his words.

* * *

The king treated Doris as a distinguished guest and invited him to dinner.

He also invited those who had been awaiting word on the prince, so that they could hear the news themselves. Among those gathered were Maximilian and the queen, as well as the Marquis of Bielefeld and men from the north.

“In front of his imperial majesty, Adrian and the envoys were like candles in the wind,” the chatty messenger said, telling the tales of the prince’s journey so well that everyone present felt as if they had been there in person.

“At that time, fifteen knights of the empire rode out, saying that Adrian and his knights would come to curse the first day of the new year! Among them were some of those paladins that the empire keeps boasting about. So, it’s not too much to say that those of Leonberg were in dire straits, and facing a desperate crisis!”

None at the table knew how fiercely the first prince and the envoys had fought, or how

viciously the imperial knights had haunted them, so they all sat listening with open mouths.

“It was a bloodbath! No! Worse than that! The knights of the kingdom had to consider their future journey, but the imperial knights, being in the empire, did not. Those knights of the empire were real evil bastards. It was normal for great numbers of them to attack lesser forces, so they changed their tactics a bit. They attacked the exhausted delegation in the middle of the night. Alas! The imperial knights really wanted to restore their honor, but they never had any, so it was a shameful exercise from the start!”

Doris said that if he had been there, he wouldn’t have put up with such nonsense. He even clenched his fist to stress this.

“Of course, Adrian and his knights were not so easily beaten.”

In between his excited words, Doris took a sip of water and then told them of how the delegation had smashed about half of the fifteen knights who had pursued them. The proud paladins of the empire were defeated by the heroes of the kingdom, one after the other. It was miraculous that the delegation had managed to fight, despite their exhaustion after constant battles and continued pursuit; and for four entire months to boot!

“But in the end, they reached their limit. The kingdom’s knights were tired, and the knights of the empire had united and surrounded them. The battleground was chosen by the imperial knights, they had driven the delegation into a trap! At the time, I had just caught up with the delegation.”

Doris Dotrin paused for a moment, and then turned in his seat to address his entire audience, asking, “Do you know what Adrian said when facing the imperial knights at the time?”

* * *

“Arwen, from now on, command the Templars. Destroy them.”

Doris Dotrin stood tall, tilting his head as he first looked at the kingdom’s knights, and then at the imperial knights who seemed to fill the horizon.

The number of imperial knights who surrounded the delegation reached up to a whopping three-hundred, and two paladins were among them.

It would not be strange if everyone from Leonberg were annihilated, but the first

prince was not planning an escape; he was discussing the destruction of his foes!

“Don’t let a single thing live.”

Adrian even ordered that were to be no survivors.

“As Your Highness commands!”

Once more, Adrian’s knights accepted his orders without question.

“I think they are all insane, as a group,” Jin Katrin stated. Jin was the vice-commander of the Knights of the Sky and Doris’s long-time friend. He had much to say about the knights of Leonberg.

“Let’s wait and see.”

Jin commanded three wyvern riders of the Sky Knights to take to the air and prepare for an assault.

It was then that Adrian Leonberger stood facing the paladins of the empire.

“A rat bites a cat if cornered. But I speak too much.”

Adrian then drew his sword.

“The sword of a Blood Lion is perfect for toppling empires!”

# CHAPTER 127
# I WILL COME BACK AFTER FIXING THE MESS (3)

Adrian Leonberger stepped forward.

Am imperial knight stepped up and said, “It is not necessary for the royal family to intervene in the affairs of the knights.”

They wanted him to quietly watch as his knights died. The prince did not answer. He just kept walking. Then a paladin said, “He is still the prince of a country, a precious person, so take care not to hurt him.”

Three imperial knights moved, their swords still sheathed, reaching out their hands to detain Adrian.

‘Sasak!’ there was a flash of light, and the hand of a knight fell to the floor.

“Uh? Uuh!? Aahhhhhh!” the knight grabbed onto his severed wrist and gave a lengthy scream, but the scream didn’t last that long. No human can scream with a slit throat.

‘Paht!’ the knight fell to the ground as he took one last step. Adrian laughed as his blade tore into the throats of the other knights. The first prince then ran his finger along his bloody blade.

It was an outright provocation, a mockery.

“Wow!” Doris Dotrin exclaimed as he watched from the sky. “He just cut their throats.”

Doris had figured that Prince Adrian would exchange some words with the knights before swords were drawn. Instead, Adrian had started slicing right away. And even with a hundred knights facing him, he wore a proud expression. What great spirit!

It was certainly an impressive scene, but it isn’t possible to win wars with pluck and

ambition alone. Adrian had cut down three foes, and there were still three-hundred imperial knights surrounding the delegation. Among them were two paladins, knights among knights.

Their power would be quite difficult to overcome all in all.

“Now you see me!” the first prince roared.

What was Adrian hiding? Why did he so confidently choose to do battle rather than escape?

Doris’s heart pounded, and he had lifted his buttocks from the saddle without realizing it.

“It looks really ugly right now. Please stay back,” Jin Katrin hollered, caring for his prince.

Doris had his attention solely fixed on Adrian Leonberger. Jin’s words didn’t even enter his ears; his nagging was nothing new.

He looked down at Adrian with anticipation.

* * *

The imperial knights began to move. Instead of responding to Prince Adrian’s provocation, they chose to narrow the siege and press in on the delegation.

It was then that Leonberg’s knights charged, all at once. A champion of the kingdom with a shining sword was in the lead.

‘Wgkadak!’

The vanguard of the encirclement collapsed at once, but not many died. The imperial knights had been wary of the kingdom’s champion, and as soon as she charged at them, they spread their lines thinner to increase the scope of their own assault.

And so the battle began.

Leonberg’s knights ran wild, and the advantage of the imperials’ encirclement soon disappeared. They had thought that simple numerical superiority would be enough

to deal with the knights of the kingdom.

Their supposition was in error.

If Leonberg's knights had been ordinary knights, the paladins of the empire could have made short work of them. The knights of the kingdom were no ordinary knights; they didn't fight in the normal manner: With swords and shields. Fists, knees, heads: They swung whatever they could swing, and sometimes scooped up dirt with the tips of their swords and flicked it into their enemies' eyes.

They fought more like mercenaries than knights, and they were very accustomed to melee warfare. They would be dealing with the foe that faced them, but then suddenly stab out their blades at another enemy, even changing opponents mid-strike.

It was the imperial knights who had to be vigilant. They had to be on the lookout for when a sword would strike out of nowhere as they squared off with the enemy in front of them.

None of the imperials had planned for such a situation because this was not how knights should fight. The imperial knights' false expectation was their first defeat.

Their second defeat was that they believed that their paladins would be able to crush the enemy.

The imperial knights were now wracked with hesitation. They had come into the battle with their sanity intact, while the knights of Leonberg fought uncontrolled, as if their lives were in the greatest danger.

"Where are the paladins!?"

The imperial knight sighted the paladin and ran to him.

"Paladin! There you are!"

'Deechur! Chika, chika, chik,' something rolled to the knight's feet. It was a head that been cleanly severed. It was the paladin's head, and he had died without even getting the chance of blinking in amazement.

* * *

“Just a single strike,” Doris Dotrin repeated.

The paladin’s head had been struck off his shoulders after a single strike from Adrian’s sword.

The Dotrin Kingdom’s personnel were silent as they watched the battle, so surprised by what they saw that they could barely believe their eyes or ears.

It all looked quite ridiculous, but Doris couldn’t laugh: He felt the same as the others.

When he had seen a paladin become a headless corpse in the span of a second, he was astonished.

No matter how much the paladin had underestimated his opponent, Doris had not expected him to die so quickly. The same astonishment was felt by all the Knights of the Sky who had seen the paladin of the empire die.

Not one of them spoke.

After a while, Jin said that it must have been a fluke, with Adrian having put all his mana into a single strike to overcome his opponent’s greater power. It would never work twice, Jin added.

It was a reasonable guess.

The knights of the empire who had first stepped out to detain the prince had fallen to a similar trick, and the Sky Knights all agreed that such must be Prince Adrian’s ways.

It didn’t take them long to realize that they had guessed wrong.

* * *

“Considering your royal status, we were trying to save your life! You will be shown no more mercy!” the remaining paladin bellowed as he set out to rectify the situation, his Aura Blade deployed with full force from the start. An unpleasant energy wave, the unique energy of mana rings, reached the Wyvern Knights high in the sky.

“It will be difficult this time. The Leonberger family has forgotten their traditions,

after all."

Doris nodded as he heard Jin's words.

The family of knights who had once been known as the clan of the Dragon Slayer no longer existed. All that remained was a royal family who had forgotten their traditions, a slowly-dying family.

Doris didn't know why the prince had chosen to accumulate his mana in a mana heart, as he must have only created the shell without the kernel within himself.

Mana hearts that had lost their true essence were helpless when facing champions of the rings.

Perhaps Prince Adrian would soon be defeated, just like the Sword Masters of the past were so gruesomely defeated by the Knights of the Ring.

Doris definitely thought so, at least until Adrian opened his mouth.

'Qawah!'

"Out of nowhere, the wind raged

"Green are the grasslands still"

"Scorching: The time when summer lives"

"A storm blew in from nowhere"

In the center of it was the Prince of Leonberg.

Doris groaned and got goosebumps all over. It was the reproduction of the ancient feat, a heritage of the ancestors. It was the manifestation of Muhunshi.

"They were fooling the world!" Doris exclaimed spontaneously. It was well known that the Leonbergers had abandoned their traditions and taken up the use of mana rings. "They didn't forget!"

Prince Adrian had unleashed the power of Muhunshi as he faced his foe. Doris was very excited to discover that there was another successor of the ancients other than

those of Ganwoong Burgundy's line.

Still, his excitement quickly subsided, for Doris knew all too well that battles weren't won by only an adherence to tradition.

Traditions were long and old stories, and life was brief.

If you don't truly believe in it, the power of such an amazing feat will fade.

The verse might continue, but the power therein contained would not be complete.

If you possess an artifact, you might borrow karma from the Muhunshi poem, but Prince Adrian didn't seem to possess anything that could be called an artifact.

It was unknown whether the Leonberger royal family had completely lost the relics or whether they merely aren't gifted to the firstborn prince.

If there was anything that Doris knew, it was that the legacy of a family of great knights would be destroyed forever. Another tradition would disappear.

"Get ready."

The Sky Knights lowered their visors in preparation for the assault.

"On three, we fly in."

Doris was thinking of attacking right after the first meeting of blades.

"One."

He could see Adrian gathering the storm into his blade.

"Two."

The Paladin charged at the prince.

'Klang!'

A roar broke out as swords met.

“Three!”

The wyverns hunched down and plunged to the earth. Doris was with his knights.

His posture was lowered, almost lying on his stomach, and he gripped a twenty-two-foot lance under his armpit. Mana was channeled to the tip of the lance. Doris was intent on piercing through the paladin where the man stood.

He studied the ground and locked onto his target – And then lost him.

“Huh?”

Doris widened his eyes. Beneath him, the battle raged. When Doris sighted the paladin again, the man was standing with his sword held out before him.

His entire body was filled with puncture wounds, and before him stood Prince Adrian, who Doris had thought had already died.

“The paladin has four rings, and I know, or thought, that the prince was weaker than that.”

The paladin shook in hatred. However, he couldn’t rush at the prince, and it had already turned into a cat and mouse game.

Doris was almost disappointed. His plan was to kill the paladin on behalf of the young prince and so save his life. He did it anyway, even if the prince had already half-killed the paladin.

“No! Oh shit!”

‘Kwap!’

As the wyvern leveled out and the lance pierced into the paladin, Doris heard the young prince swear behind his back.

“It’s mine! It’s my battle, my achievement, and this damned man dares steal it!”

It was a curse that Doris had never heard in his life, but still, he was not offended at all.

He did, in truth, intrude upon the game of another. Doris was surprised by the energy he felt. He realized that Adrian had completely recited a full verse of Muhunshi, without the use of a relic. It wasn't even a common poem: It was a heroic poem.

It meant that the young prince had already reached the level of the heroes of old.

In this world, no matter what you do, you cannot deny the extraordinary. Even if it couldn't be, if it was the reality, it was true.

Doris Dotrin turned in the air once more and landed in front of the first prince.

"Nooo!"

"What monster… Oouch!"

The imperial knights trampled on by the wyvern and speared on the lance screamed.

"Hah, do you know what you've done to me right now?" Adrian asked as he ground his teeth, still emitting the energy he had unleashed against the paladin.

Doris's wyvern gave a low screech.

'Creee.'

It sounded more like a groan than a threat, and it was the sound of an animal in fear.

To see a wyvern, who doesn't even blink when facing a troll, screech in fear when facing a single human? It was absurd!

It was more absurd that in a world where only rare, damaged traditions existed, such a ridiculous guy as Adrian had appeared.

"What on earth are you?"

Adrian gave no answer to Doris's question; he simply demanded that Doris repay the price of the stolen victory.

* * *

“And that’s why I came here as a messenger.”

Doris laughed brightly as he saw the people of Leonberger look at him with grim faces. The people around the table were silent for a while, so astonishing was the tale that had flowed from Prince Doris’s mouth.

Then, after a while, the one-eyed knight spoke up.

“So where is His Highness, and what is he doing?”

“Even if you haven’t asked me, I was about to tell you,” Doris said as he looked at all around the table.

“Adrian is now,” and here stopped speaking as he wet his lips with spittle, then continued, “My mind has become vacant… Ah! Adrian, along with the Sky Knights, is making a mess all over the place, as well as the knights of the delegation.”

# CHAPTER 128
# ONE LOST, ONE LEFT (1)

Maximilian quietly watched the people at the dinner table.

They had at first gathered to hear the story of his brother, but as Doris talked, it had become a dinner at which the affairs of state were discussed. Adrian, who all had thought had been merely pursued, had in fact battled against the empire. The possibility of an outbreak of war could not be discounted. Some said that the prince's actions would surely lead to greater pressure from the empire, and even war.

Others stated that the empire had no grounds upon which they could declare war, as their official position was that it was a contest between knights.

"Since when did the empire need a justification?" the king asked, stating further that if the empire wanted a war, they wouldn't worry about justifying it.

Some fell silent as they heard his words. Everyone knew the temperament of the empire all too well. Once the anxiety of war reached a fever-pitch, the Prince of Dotrin, who claimed to be Adrian's friend, spoke up.

"If they want to start a war, they must at least have a decent excuse, however minor."

He affirmed that the empire would not start a war over the delegation's actions, or even Adrian's current mission.

"They don't know that the Knights of the Sky are involved. Since they move by air, it is impossible to track their course. Therefore it is impossible to link the current tumult occurring in the empire to the Leonberger delegation."

Prince Doris also dismissed the possibility of magical tracking, saying that a powerful wizard has already taken countermeasures. He also said that Adrian's goal to sow confusion would be an adequate success.

When Maximilian asked what he meant, Doris replied that Adrian was creating a mess by attacking provinces that had not been involved in the pursuit of the

delegation.

“They have decided to collect the arms and armor of their pursuers and leave them as evidence on the scenes of slaughter. If we are lucky, it will lead to conflict among the factions supporting the principes.”

“It’s a false-flag operation,” the Marquis of Bielefeld exclaimed as he slapped his knee. He added that you wouldn’t fool the imperial nobles with a few pieces of weapons and armor, but it would be enough for the paranoid faction to become more distrustful of each other.

The anxiety that had enveloped those at dinner slowly eased and then completely disappeared.

Once the possibility of war was eliminated, the king and others started discussing Adrian’s activities. They were all surprised that a man who had accumulated mana in his mana heart had been able to deal with two imperial paladins, who were knights of the ring.

“In the past, His Highness has unleashed amazing powers in emergencies. His Highness told me it was the power of Muhunshi,” the one-eyed cavalry commander from Balahard, Quéon, told everyone present.

It was a factoid that Maximilian also knew. He had felt Adrian’s Muhunshi on multiple occasions in the orcish war. The Winter Knights themselves had joined in on the songs, raising the resonance of Adrian’s verse.

Maximilian had never thought deeply about it, figuring that the power itself didn’t come from the poems. He was soon proved wrong when the Prince of Dotrin educated them on the matter.

What Maximilian had thought to be mundane and unsurprising was actually an ability that had been handed down from generation to generation in the Leonberger family.

The fact of the matter was that the Leonberger royal family had abandoned mana hearts for mana rings a few generations ago.

Maximilian threw a subtle glance at his father. The king had a stern face, and his eyes were closed, seemingly as shocked as Maximilian himself.

Although the Leonbergers had taken up mana rings to beat back the beasts of the empire, they had, in fact, abandoned their greatest weapon.

If the king wasn't shocked, it would have been weird indeed.

"His Highness has always regretted it. He said it was an unavoidable trend, to forget tradition and take up the rings, yet he always said the loss was truly great," Quéon said in a heavy tone, and one could hear the sorrow in his heart.

"Knights possess great strength if they possess completed mana hearts, but such completion is near impossible to achieve. That is why my brother never forced other knights to take up the use of mana hearts."

"Wait. I think I heard something that is difficult to understand just now," Doris interjected. He was confused, saying that he thought all the Leonbergers had inherited their ancestors' gifts.

"How on earth did Adrian inherit the tradition, then?"

No one could provide an answer because no one knew.

"One day, my brother suddenly showed such ability. Everyone assumed that he read of it in olds books and so learned of it."

Everyone stared at each other, but no one spoke.

"It didn't fall from the sky, and it didn't rise into him from the ground. Nobody thought it was weird, and I didn't ask him about it," Maximilian said.

The Prince of Dotrin looked embarrassed, and so did Maximilian. Now that he thought about it, he didn't know anything about his brother. They had never spoken properly, except when they discussed military and state affairs.

Maximilian only realized it now.

He looked at his father, and the king was also troubled.

"His Highness does not discuss personal affairs," the Marquis of Bielefeld said, a man who had visited the First Palace on a daily basis. All the people concerned for the safety of the first prince were gathered in one place, yet none really knew him all

that well.

“The only person who openly spoke with His Highness was Count Bale Balahard.”

“Where is he now?”

Prince Doris’s question stiffened everyone around the table.

The royal family was somewhat responsible for the death of the former count of Balahard, so no one was willing to answer.

“He died battling the Warlord,” Quéon finally answered the prince’s question.

“Warlord? Are you referring to the lord of the greenskins?”

Doris was amazed, so surprised that a shiver ran through his spine and into his ass.

The cavalry commander briefly explained the war against the Warlord that was fought in the north.

“This is driving me crazy,” Doris muttered as he scratched his light-brown hair.

He could scarce believe the existence of the Warlord, or that a Knight of the Ring had severed one of the monster’s arms; even that the Leonberg knights had defeated the warlord.

Saying so sounded as if he was insulting the kingdom, so the Marquis of Bielefeld politely pointed this out. However, Doris did not care; he was a man who said what he wanted to say.

After that, no one called him out for his rudeness.

“Presumably, this former Count of Balahard was a penta-chain knight?”

The term ‘penta-chain knight’ held much weight. Few knights could even dream of devoting themselves to weaving five rings, and even fewer manage to weave a perfect five. Even in the empire, overflowing with paladins, the existence of such knights is uncertain.

The state of the penta-chain knight is supreme, and the knights who achieve that

state are rare.

But it is said that Count Bale Balahard had died as such a knight.

Doris couldn't believe it, yet he had no choice other than to believe.

As Doris had said, it had indeed been impossible for those who were not penta-chain to defeat the warlord. An imperial champion and hundreds of knights had faced the beast, and they could not best it.

'Glugglug,' Maximilian's father emptied the goblet of wine that he had not touched throughout the dinner. After that, the king drank wine straight from the bottle.

This was the first time that Maximilian saw his father drink so much. The king was a man who neither enjoyed alcohol nor depended on it. Everyone now knew that there was a great champion in the kingdom, yet their emotions were different.

Quéon was staring at the ceiling, with his remaining eye wide open. Bielefeld had closed his eyes and remained silent. The queen was trying to hide her anxiety, but Maximilian could see her eyes shaking.

He could no longer bear staring at those terrible faces, so he turned his head.

Doris Dotrin was still in his own world, unaware of the prevailing mood.

"Now it makes sense. The power I felt that day was a power that someone couldn't handle if they weren't experienced to some extent. It is because Adrian had killed the Warlord that he was able to unleash such great power. Still, it makes no sense that he was able to learn a tradition that had been cut away from his dynasty several generations ago."

Prince Doris nodded and then began muttering to himself, finally shaking his head like a madman.

Even if the family had worked together and put effort into it, it is inevitable that the power would be damaged through the generations. It is impossible to learn a tradition that had been cut away so long ago.

Maximilian watched as Doris continued to mutter.

The king had downed the entire bottle of wine and had fallen silent. He then spoke in a sad tone.

“It is said that the changes in my son began after the founding king’s sword had pierced his stomach when he had passed so near the gates of death.”

The Prince of Dotrin had been in his own world up till then as he talked to himself, but he now asked whether the sword had been the Dragon Slayer, which had been wielded to kill Gwangryong.

The king nodded, and the prince thought for a moment more before clapping his hands.

“It’s clear! There are objects in the world called artifacts, and each artifact contains more than one tradition.”

He added that if his guess was correct, then the Dragon Slayer was one of these relics, as it had been passed down from generation to generation in the Leonberger family.

“Adrian must have been chosen by this relic of the Leonberger royal family.”

This story was a pretty one for Maximilian to hear. He had heard that it was about time that his brother, who had a troubled relationship with their father, had changed abruptly. It was only after that that he had shown the prominence of his unprecedented abilities.

If Maximilian’s elder brother had obtained the tradition and power of Dragon Slayer, then everything fits together perfectly.

The king gave a small nod, saying that it must be the reason for Adrian’s obsession with Dragon Slayer. He then added that it was fortunate that a champion of the royal blood arose before the evil empire could steal the sword.

“According to historical records, the archetype of the tradition passed down to the Leonberger royal family is at least on a mythological level. It is natural that the empire covets the Dragon Slayer,” Doris mused.

To Maximilian, the prince’s words sounded like a rebuke of the royal family for forgetting such a glorious tradition. As for the king, his dark face only darkened; his

emotions the same as Maximilian's.

Still, Adrian's messenger was unaware of such animosity and said something that was on the king's mind as well.

"Of course, Adrian couldn't really have inherited a mythical tradition. For him to have defeated the Warlord, he needed to possess a certain level of natural skill."

Doris asserted that the power that Adrian inherited was rather that of a heroic poem. Both mythic and heroic Muhunshi was an unfamiliar topic to everyone, so Maximilian asked how powerful Adrian truly was.

"If he has fully inherited everything without any damage, he must possess the power of heroic poems." The Prince of Dotrin was silent for a while, then said, "He's at least on the level of a penta-chain knight."

* * *

The empire's border control was too lax, as well as their domestic security.

The nobles blindly believed in their prestige, believing that none would dare harm them.

They were true morons who had targeted me and the delegation, never expecting that I would target them in turn. From their point of view, I was just a petty prince from a small country that they could trample over at any time.

They had to learn: If you step on an earthworm, it will only wriggle. But if a cat corners a rat, the rat bites back. If you draw a knife, that same knife can end your life.

I let them learn my lesson. Of course, it wasn't for free.

The price of my instruction was their lives. I flew across the empire and murdered nobles at random. Sometimes we invaded their bed-chambers and slit their throats. At other times, we killed them once they and their knights left their fortresses.

We were giving the empire a beating of insane proportions. Thirty or more imperial nobles had died by my hand, and five of them were counts or greater.

Thanks to this, the empire was plunged into chaos.

They reinforced their checkpoints to catch the intruders, and they patrolled everywhere.

I mounted my wyvern and laughed as I thought of the empire's soldiers and knights. As I laughed, I heard an uneven voice speak up.

"Oh, really. Don't clutch your waist! You have a very strange personality."

It was Jin Katrin, a close friend of Prince Dotrin and vice-commander of the Sky Knights.

He looked at me and grumbled.

"Now that we've run so wild, can't we stop? In recent weeks, the wizards' attempts at tracking and pursuing us have intensified. If it goes on like this, the Knights of the Sky will be exposed sooner or later."

Jin's voice was exhausted, for we had crisscrossed the vast empire from east to west and from north to south over the past few months.

But I didn't care.

"Today, I am a winged lion."

I was like a knight who had wandered thousands of miles to end his foes.

"What, a winged lion? More like a loose foal," Jin grumbled under his breath.

I ignored him again. It wasn't time to return to the kingdom. I was thinking of adding a last, proper decoration; to enact a final proper battle.

"Let's go to one final place."

"Where?" Jin asked.

"The Marquis of Yvesinth," I said with a smile.

My last gift to the emperor would be the marquis' head.

"Crazy! You're insane! He is the strongest marquis!"

Of course, Jin Katrin seemed to disagree with me.

# CHAPTER 129
# ONE LOST, ONE LEFT (2)

Some of the imperial nobles that we killed had been great lords. However, the Marquis of Yvesinth was a true high-ranking aristocrat, so different from those other great lords.

Security was tight, and even if Jin Katrin didn't warn me that he felt magical barriers, I would still have been alert. If we failed and were discovered, the kingdom would be engulfed in war.

Everyone asked me to reconsider, but I didn't heed their caution.

I might have done so had I never seen the empire, but now I had studied it with my own eyes.

Since I had awoken in the kingdom, it did not feel as if a full four centuries had passed while I had slept. The kingdom of fallen lions and knights who no longer believed in Muhunshi: That was the only change. The world I saw was not much different from the world of four-hundred years ago; there was only that difference. However, I realized my mistaken judgment the moment I left the kingdom.

Time might have run slowly in Leonberg, but the empire has prospered to a surprising extent. All manner of things that did not exist in the kingdom overflowed in abundance in the empire.

A level of civilization that did not exist four-hundred years ago was now in effect, and the imperial nobles were enjoying this luxury to the full.

I was ignorant, and the kingdom was also ignorant.

I didn't know how truly advanced the continent had become and how backward the Leonberg Kingdom was.

It wasn't just a difference in military power that the kingdom had to overcome. The spirit of the countries was different as well.

If you use the metaphor of Muhunshi poetry, the empire is [mythic] while the kingdom was so insignificant that it couldn't even reach [extraordinary].

If you visualize both countries as knights, then the empire is a Sword Master while the kingdom was on the level of a Sword Beginner who had only recently grabbed a sword.

If the image of nobility is used, then the empire is a king, while the kingdom wouldn't even be the mayor of some remote village.

It was as if a rabbit has chosen to fight a wolf; it was a battle between an adult and a child.

This was the essence of the battle that I, that the kingdom, would need to wage in the future.

The odds were near-impossible to beat.

To increase our chances even slightly, we had to confuse the empire so that they would doubt each other, finally taking up the spear and the sword in a civil war.

Of course, even that wasn't easy to achieve.

As long as the foresighted descendants of Burgundy held onto their power, any conflict of considerable proportions would soon be suppressed.

But fortunately, such a time has not yet come; the turbulence was still in the future.

The fierce Warlord of the greenskin race has already risen in the north.

The greedy, magical sword-dancers of the faerie race now wandered the world outside of their forests.

The Prima Meister of the dwarves has set out to found a new Eternal Furnace.

All the non-human beings who had hidden in obscurity were appearing across the world, one by one.

My case was the same: I had fallen asleep for four centuries and had been unaware that the descendants of my friend were dying out. I wasn't so stupid that I believed

that all such events happened only in the northern part of the continent, where my eyes had reached.

It was no coincidence that the descendants of Agnes Bavaria, who had forgotten their roots, had appeared before me. It was not by chance that the scion of Umbert Dortmund, the forebear of a family who had been awaiting this time, had met me.

I had seen countless wars and tumults through the ages; therefore, I was more sensitive to the signs than anyone else. Something was happening in this world, and the humans were unaware of it.

Still, I couldn't figure out what it was. My powers as a watcher had been sealed away. Now I was just a human. However, I had experienced turbulent times, and some of that insight remained within me, so I felt it, even if only weakly.

I was sure that whatever was about to happen would not be trivial, and it would not benefit humanity. It was a huge event that would sweep over the continent.

Now, I wanted to lift myself into the air as soon as possible. Such turbulence could only be an opportunity. Taking the head of the Marquis of Yvesinth would only be the advent of the chaos that the empire would have to face in the future.

I was careful and bided my time.

After waiting for the opportune moment, we were able to corner the marquis and his followers and slit their throats.

"When we return, I am going to tell His Highness that I don't want to go flying with his friends again," Jin Katrin said as he looked at the corpses, his face yellow. It seems that he was quite weakened after dealing with Yvesinth's wizard, who had been of a fairly high rank.

However, I was satisfied with our work.

"Now all these nobles will be arguing over the position of the marquis."

It was as Jin Katrin said: Since all the direct lineages with succession rights have been wiped out, all families with even a slight hereditary claim will be rushing to strengthen their positions.

I wanted to stay and watch the imperial dogs quarreling, but unfortunately, a lot of time has passed, and I could no longer delay.

It was truly time to return.

“Go,” I said, and Jin began to gesture.

All the wyverns took to the air at once.

* * *

The Sky Knights dropped our party off near the border between the empire and the kingdom and then disappeared over the horizon. I didn’t say goodbye; we would meet them in the royal capital anyway. The delegation slowly moved north.

On our journey, we encountered the imperial border guards several times.

Among them was De Gaulle de Devisch, the senior knight of the 112th Knights who had insulted me and was so insulted in turn.

“Hut!?”

The high-ranking knight of the wicked empire widened his eyes when he saw me. It was as if he had seen a ghost.

“It’s been a while, polite knight,” I greeted him, and De Gaulle held an ugly expression, which he quickly corrected as he started chatting with a friendly face.

“If you go now, we don’t know when we will see you again. So how about we share our goodbyes?”

Of course, his words scarcely reached my ears.

When De Gaulle could not persuade us, he began following us from a distance. When I saw a rider coming and going during this time, I assumed that he had sent a messenger out to the fortress.

“We must be bothering him.”

I straightened my face and knew I had nothing to worry about. I urged the weary

delegation to head straight into Leonberg territory. We reached a spot where we could see the border between the countries in the distance.

'Dukkudukukkuduku,' came the sound of horses being ridden hard from behind us. The rising dust gave away their position, and I saw that they were riding from the imperial fortress.

De Gaulle, at their lead, closed the gap with us. I glanced at them and silently instructed the delegation.

"Be ready."

Arwen picked her father up onto her shoulders, and Carls carried Niccolo.

"Run!"

Hearing my order, the party started running for the border.

"Your Highness! Where are you going!" the embarrassed De Gaulle cried as he tried to block us off with his steed, but he could not catch up to us: We were running by expending mana.

"The last one over the border has to run all the way to the capital!"

As they heard me, the Templars sped up even more. Carls, carrying Niccolo, protested, but when he saw Arwen and her father pass him by, he shut up and increased his pace.

As we ran for the border, De Gaulle's pursuit continued. At every moment, the imperial forces were closing the gap.

"Your Highness! Wait a minute! His Excellency, the commander, has something to tell you!" De Gaulle exclaimed eagerly, but I saw no value in stopping and playing games with the Imperial Border Guard.

"He can tell me later!"

Still, De Gaulle and his border patrol persisted in following us. However, it wasn't long until they had to call off the pursuit.

“Your Highness! There are the knights of the Southern Legion!”

Those of the southern legion had noticed the rising dust clouds, so they had hastened to the border.

“Their response speed is good!”

“Disclose your affiliation and identity!” the southern knights shouted as they halted before us. Only after I heard their alert voices did I realize the state of the delegation.

After wandering so long through imperial territory, our faces were unwashed and haggard, our clothes were torn and tattered by repeated battles, and even our coats-of-arms, with the lion of Leonberg, were dust-covered.

We were an unknown group running excitedly for the border, and one of us was even carrying an old man. It wasn’t strange that the knights did not recognize us; they were right to be suspicious. The Templars grasped the nature of the situation, shrugged, and polished the center of their breastplates until their heraldry could be seen.

“Oh!” When the symbols were revealed under the dirt, the southern knights caught their breaths.

“Well, that’s no way to greet us!” Siorin shouted with a red face after he had climbed from his daughter’s shoulders, reminding the knights of their duty.

The delegation’s mission was finally completed, and we had returned.

“The Southern Legion welcomes His Highness the First Prince!” the knights exclaimed as one as they all knelt before me. I smiled and accepted their greeting. Then I suddenly looked back.

The imperial border guards were looking our way.

I waved my hand at them. I could see the distorted faces of the imperial soldiers as they saw my goodbye. This made me wave my hand even more enthusiastically.

“Thank you for the great drop-off!”

* * *

“We are thankful for your safe return.”

The Knights of the Southern Legion were those who had seen me off the day we had left the kingdom. I felt their sincerity, for they had waited long for our return.

It wasn’t just me who felt that way, for the Templars were also talking to the knights in friendly tones. The southerners were thrilled that the Templars had defeated the imperial knights.

“Now, they can no longer look down upon the knights of Leonberg.”

Whenever they met with imperial knights, the southerners were ignored and dismissed, so they now treated the Templars as great heroes.

“But who was it that defeated a paladin of the empire?” one of the knights asked in excitement.

The reactions of the Templars were different as they heard the question. Some looked at Arwen while others looked at Gwain and his comrades. Some even looked at me.

The southern knights were confused by the different stares directed at different people.

I smiled and pointed towards Arwen and Gwain.

“Oh, oh!”

“To have such gifted young people born into the kingdom!’

Arwen was embarrassed by the reaction of the southerners, while Gwain and his comrades did not show any emotion. The knights constantly praised the newly born champions all the way to the fortress.

“If you achieved such a feat, you deserve praise and the ball they will be throwing for us,” I said with a giggle and told them to just have fun with it. “Here we are.”

Only after we arrived at the fortress could the new champions escape the uncomfortable situation.

“Heaven helped you all. It is clear that the ancestors of the kingdom looked down upon you with favor,” the commander of the Southern Legion said with some emotion once confirming that we were safe. He condemned the brutality of the empire and praised our party for not giving in.

The same sentiment was felt by his knights.

Many of their compliments were directed at me. They said that due to my outstanding leadership, the overblown prestige of the empire had taken a knock. I could not easily get used to the situation.

I had been struggling for months, so to suddenly receive praise like this made me uncomfortable.

“This ball is to praise you and what you have done. Just enjoy it,” Arwen said. Didn’t I say the same thing to her some time ago?

“Damn it,” I spat out and then quietly studied the delegation.

Everyone looked shabby, but their eyes shone brightly.

Arwen had become a quad-chain knight by confronting a paladin, so she has unquestionably grown. The other Templars had also gained much experience during our trip through the empire. The same held true for Gwain, Trindall, and Kampra. Within them, the three Ekyon brothers were working hard to digest the traces of mana scattered throughout their bodies. As a result, they seemed to have overcome the sundering of their rings, having performed well against the imperial knights.

I wasn’t sure, but I believed that they were the three knights who had achieved the greatest results in the shortest span of time.

Adelia had been present, but she hadn’t played a big part in our trip.

It was because her [War Mania] and [Butcher] were not easy to control, and also because she was not willing to wield her blade against other humans by her own volition.

That didn’t mean that she didn’t gain any experience, though. Born with her ancestor’s natural talent, she has learned a lot of things whilst watching the others do battle. The greater depth in her eyes was proof of this. I was sure that, with a little

luck, she would soon become a Sword Master. Then she would be able to overcome her inherent weakness to some extent. Of course, the lunacy will still remain within her.

The commander didn't bother us for long, rather taking care of the rest of our group who had returned. We welcome his consideration, as we were not yet in the place where we wanted to be. There was still a need for secrecy.

Publicly, it was believed that our delegation had left Hwangdo, faced challenges from knightly orders, and then returned, barely alive. No matter if this fortress was in the kingdom, it would be folly to talk about what we had truly done in the empire.

So everyone emptied tankards of alcohol without saying anything.

"Hahah."

Occasionally, the sound of laughter flared up, but in general, the atmosphere was quiet as everyone tilted back drinks.

I was drinking moderately, but Erhim Kiringer had chosen to encourage me.

"Your Highness, have another glass."

I almost refused him, but then I saw that everyone else was holding their drinks, waiting for me to make a toast.

"You all worked hard," I said, and the Templars looked at with expectant eyes. When they realized that it was my entire toast, they booed.

They had looked forward to a big speech from me.

After they had jeered for a while, they soon began to pour themselves more drinks.

At that time, the mouths of the Templars, which had been locked, began to loosen up. However, even as they laughed and spoke, not one of them mentioned what had occurred on our return journey.

I watched on as the Templars relaxed and took joy in life.

I was happy.

The fact that no one had died under my command made me more proud than our fair victories and achievements.

'Chik,' someone grabbed the cup from my hand.

"Overdrinking is bad for a leader," Arwen said.

I grabbed a bottle from the table and said, "Don't tell it to me. Tell it to those guys over there."

'Chik,' someone grabbed the bottle from my hand as I joked with Arwen.

"You have been drinking far too much alcohol these days," Carls nagged at me, counting the bottles that I had emptied. The two of them teamed up against me, and I had not the resolve to deal with them. I lifted my hands and feet in surrender, and Adelia served me a steaming cup of tea.

"Your Highness seems wound up, yes?"

Before I could snarl, the door was suddenly flung open.

A man appeared, and even if he looked like a beggar among beggars, it was not difficult to recognize him.

"Jordan?"

He was the 17th Platoon commander of the Balahard Rangers, Jordan.

Jordan approached me, and as he stared at me, he shouted, "I've been wandering for months looking for Your Highness!"

His eyes looked exhausted, and his voice was hoarse. Jordan momentarily grabbed the bottle from Carls and downed it in a single gulp. Then he started pouring out how much he had been searching for me. His tone was full of dissatisfaction, and his mouth set in a sneer, but I could feel that the emotion in his voice was one of relief and endearment.

Perhaps because of the alcohol, a strong feeling welled up in my heart.

I went and hugged Jordan without hesitation.

“Oh, that’s bad!” The odor that slammed into my nose quickly made me break off the embrace.

“First, wash yourself, Jordan. That’s the most urgent th-“

“This is not the time for taking baths!” Jordan suddenly shouted. “The empire is preparing for war!”

His face was deadly serious.

I sobered up real quick as I heard this. Siorin jumped from his seat and asked Jordan to elaborate on the immediate military situation.

“I wandered through the empire as I searched for you all, so I found out about it.”

Jordan explained how he headed back into the empire, vowing that he would not return before he had found me. As he scouted, he noticed a sudden increase in military movement and training of troops, as well as the large-scale deployment of units.

All were sure signs of war.

My face felt suddenly dry as if my muscles had hardened and my skins beset by grit.

“What is the destination of their deployment?”

“It has been confirmed,” Jordan answered me, taking the map that he held and spreading it out on a table. I glanced at the ranger’s map. Lines were drawn, all pointing to the eastern border of the empire. Then the long lines headed down along the southern border, where a small kingdom lay. I groaned.

Dotrin: That was the name I saw on the map.

# CHAPTER 130
# ONE LOST, ONE LEFT (3)

I had originally considered staying for a few days at the border fortress and relaxing, but decided that I didn't have time for it. I explained the situation to the commander and instructed him on how to prepare for an imperial provocation. We then borrowed some horses and rode straight for the capital.

"Hja, Hja!" I rode on day and night. I had to meet Doris and his knights, who were waiting for me in the city. After riding without a halt, I finally reached the royal capital.

"Well, Your Highness?"

It seemed that we had ridden faster than the messenger sent from the fortress, so the people of the capital seemed stunned to discover that the delegation and I were still alive.

Regardless, I headed straight to the palace.

As I passed through the gates of the royal palace, I hurried in to find the king.

"Your Highness, His Majesty is waiting."

It seemed that the news had come from the gate, for the palace knight standing guard immediately greeted me and went to open the door.

"Your Highness!"

"Brother!"

The Marquis of Bielefeld and Maximilian laughed in joy when they saw me. The king sat on his throne and also graced me with a rare smile.

However, there was no time to share the joy of reunion.

I stepped toward the descendant of the Sky Blade, who had also come to the hall.

“Doris.”

“I have paid all my debts-“

“It’s a war, Doris.”

“What?” he stiffened as he heard my words.

“The empire is gathering troops on their border with Dotrin,” I said to a face that held the purest of smiles.

Doris could no longer smile so innocently.

* * *

Even though we were reuniting after a year and a few months, the atmosphere in the hall was heavily subdued. Doris and his knights looked hurried as if they already wanted to be flying toward their country on their wyverns.

“Wait, I’ve sent someone out just now, so we’ll know the details soon.”

I held the men of Dotrin back. Once the messenger I sent to Montpellier came back, we would be able to know more about the situation.

Erhim soon appeared, for it was him I had sent to the marquis. Montpellier had come with him.

“Well, Your Highness-“

“Inform us of the internal situation of the empire.”

The Marquis of Montpellier was silent, looking like a cow that had been led to the slaughterhouse.

“We already know that there will be war.”

The marquis’ face hardened after he had looked at me, and he immediately began to speak up.

“The imperial family intends to completely erase the Dotrin kingdom from the map.”

As Jin Katrin heard this, he stared at me with resentment. Jin had become entangled in something that did not concern him because of me and now held me in blame that his country has come into the crossfire.

Jin’s reaction was a misunderstanding.

“The imperial family had been keeping an eye on specific families and kingdoms on the continent for a long time. They’ve been paying enough attention to have them classified into different sections and have distinguished the many differences between families and factions.”

Montpellier told us all the story of the imperial family’s special list concerning foreign officials. It was the first time I heard of it, and I inadvertently frowned.

I glanced at Doris, and his expression mirrored mine.

I think we were both thinking along similar lines as well.

“Tell me of the kingdoms and families on that list,” I ordered Montpellier.

The marquis hesitated and then began listing the names one by one.

The family of Bavaria, even though they had forgotten their roots.

The Dotrin royal family, built by the descendants of the Sky Blade.

The Leonberger royal family, who were the successors of the Dragon Slayer.

From Montpellier’s mouth flowed the names of families that I knew very well.

All of them had more than four centuries of history, and all of them were families that had achieved great feats.

I had a gut feeling why the emperor’s list contained so many families of a [mythic] class.

“Are you aiming for the relics?” Doris asked.

“Or are you aiming for the traditions themselves?” I added.

I had already learned that several attempts had been made by Montpellier to seize my true body.

To gain a monopoly on relics or to learn of their traditions: The empire’s purpose was unknown.

I could only guess the emperor wasn’t interested in the collection of old traditions out of idle curiosity, and whatever his plans were, they would never benefit the kingdom.

“The power rating for the Leonberger royal family has been steadily downgraded in recent decades. However, the ratings for the Dotrin family have continued to rise,” Montpellier said. “The conquest of Dotrin had long since been planned, and the only problem remaining was one of timing. If the empire spends enormous sums on arming and deploying the troops, it wants some tangible gains.”

Montpellier spilled the beans over the purpose of the war.

“His Imperial Majesty figures that it would be beneficial if the war with Dotrin can eliminate internal political threats in the empire.”

The true purpose of the war was that the nobles supporting the principes would rather turn their gaze toward an outside foe before warring with each other and so undermine the national power of the empire.

This was the true casus belli for the war with Dotrin.

“Soon, an official imperial decree will be delivered to each kingdom, blaming Dotrin for the assassinations of imperial nobles and calling them to account.”

It didn’t even matter whether the empire had determined the true circumstances for why the Sky Knights had been part of the murders: It was the ideal reason for them to wage war against Dotrin.

The Dotrin Kingdom has just run out of luck.

Hence, instead of the emperor having to conduct domestic crackdowns, he could use the war to stabilize internal politics by having the troublesome nobles tie down their

troops. The fact that a small kingdom that had moved against the empire would be quashed was just a bonus.

“The emperor would rather turn the entire continent into a barren plain of bones before having a civil war in the empire.”

Jin Katrin glared at Montpellier, and the marquis withered under that hostile gaze.

Jin’s reaction was justified; there was no one here who held any love for Montpellier.

The Sky Knights looked as if they wanted to kill the marquis right there and then, while those of Leonberg showed their burning enmity clearly as if they were recalling old memories.

Montpellier looked at me with an earnest gaze, as if begging me for help. On my part, I wanted to crush him like the worm he was.

“Aahnah!” Montpellier screamed as he grabbed his nose after being unexpectedly punched in the face.

“Why the hell!?” he cried, and I punched him a few more times before giving him my reply.

“While I was gone, you fell back into your old, wicked habits, didn’t you!?”

Montpellier was dumbstruck as he heard my words.

“And,” I shouted as I punched him again with a ‘Pak!’, “you never told me about that list!”

‘Pak!’

“Why did you hide it from me?”

‘Plak!’

“Are you thick? Are you an onion!? Come on, tell me!”

‘Pak! Puk!’

I continued to beat the marquis. I had known that I would be able to control his hellish nature while I stepped on him, but I now knew that he would not be able to forswear his despicable nature, no matter how much he got stepped on. Yet, he still had his uses.

Then I reached a conclusion: My worries were useless. I was not the one being punched in the face.

'Kreuk!'

It seemed that I had failed to inhibit my strength, for the sound of something breaking echoed through the hall. The Marquis of Montpellier clenched his jaw and then fainted.

"Well."

The hall was silent.

The Marquis of Bielefeld had always been wondering how I had gained Montpellier's support, and he nodded as he realized my methods. Still, Bielefeld did not look relieved after the question was resolved; rather, I could see him wondering just how far I would go to achieve my ends.

The king was expressionless, yet for some reason, it seemed as if he was relieved. I had guessed right: Montpellier had stirred up trouble while I was away.

"Brother," I said to Maximilian as I saw him looking at me with a respectful face, "don't follow my example."

It was weird enough that he respected me, so I didn't want him to wade into strange waters. It was more than enough that there was one prince running wild like a lunatic.

Maximilian shouldn't become like me. As a prince, he had been born with the traits of the founding king, Gruhorn. His seed was pure, and he had to walk a different path than a maniac like me.

"Violence is a last resort and should be avoided if possible," I instructed the innocent second prince. People looked at me with ridiculous expressions for a moment as I said this, but it didn't matter.

“What are you going to do?” asked Doris.

“We have to fight back. What about you?”

Doris’s face was surprisingly calm. He did look a bit stern, but that was all: Doris showed no fear about the coming war that his people would have to face. Rather, he showed great confidence.

“I bet we can make it,” he said.

“If the empire regards the apparent power of Dotrin as a lesser concern, they will lose much in this war,” Jin Katrin declared, his voice not wavering. “The emperor has misjudged things. If one of the principes die on the field of battle, then the feared civil war is sure to occur.”

I was impressed by Jin’s summation of things, as well as his fighting spirit, so I added, “If that proves to be the case, I will continue to act gently toward the third princeps.”

That way, the disaster-prone guy might grow into a serious contender for the throne.

Of course, the war in Dotrin wouldn’t be a quick thing, and the empire’s inner turmoil wouldn’t immediately disappear with its commencement. The Dotrin family would not be broken, and they would never surrender before the empire.

However, there was no need to point out that fact, for now, was the time to work hard.

“Surely,” the king said, frowning as he saw my expression, “the kingdom is not ready yet.”

The king was concerned that I would go to aid Dotrin, and he knew that Leonberg was not in a state to face the empire in an all-out war. I was worried as well, but when would the kingdom ever be ready to face the empire?

“I will go to Dotrin with my knights.”

I decided that I would go as an individual, not on behalf of Leonberg.

“It’s ridiculous! How can this country’s successor to the throne be so frivolous!”

Naturally, the king jumped from his throne as he heard me say it.

“The greater the empire is damaged in their war with Dotrin, the more Leonberg will benefit,” I said, hoping to persuade the king. It is known that Dotrin can never easily be destroyed, and only if Dotrin stands firm and torments the empire can Leonberg, which has become like an imperial province, have a greater chance at regaining full sovereignty.

“You think that the situation will alter if you add a few more knights to the fray? That’s arrogance and overconfidence speaking!”

“A single knight moving against the enemy is only a part of the whole, but sometimes that part can dominate the whole.”

“So you think you are that part that will influence the whole?”

“If I leave, there is Your Majesty and Maximilian who can watch over the kingdom.”

“You are here right now!” the king shouted.

“Your Majesty and Your Highness, how about having this conversation at a later date? It seems that the matter is too great to decide at once,” the Marquis of Bielefeld said in mediation.

“We have bickered before you. Please don’t place us at fault if we first take some time to figure out the situation,” the king, still struggling with his emotions, said to Doris.

“Your Highness, how can you be so tactlessly stupid?” the Marquis of Bielefeld condemned me after the king had left the hall. “It was only a short while ago that Your Highness has returned from being missing for so long. If only Your Highness had known how hard His Majesty was taking things, then such an argument would not have broken out.”

“Yes. Father wasn’t the only one who was concerned by your absence, brother. Your timing was bad,” Maximilian said, backing up Bielefeld.

It was unfair.

This was an opportunity to weaken the empire to a great extent, and personally, an opportunity for me to gain great power by accumulating karma. I couldn’t

understand it.

“Sometimes, I feel that you are quite clumsy despite your skillful swordsmanship, brother.”

“It’s probably because they are still so young. They don’t want to be loved, so they wander from home,” I could hear Bielefeld mutter quietly to himself.

“Brother, you have traveled long and far, so get some rest. After your hot air has cooled, I will have some time to spare for you,” Maximilian said and grabbed my arm. “So, don’t you want to take the thing you left with me?”

I couldn’t stand it anymore and chose to leave the hall. Just before I left, I said goodbye to Doris. Since the situation was urgent, he would not be able to stay longer, and he and he would fly to the mainland immediately.

“I’ll leave someone behind just in case, so if you want to contact me, talk with them.”

“I’ll do so,” I said and waved my hand. “I didn’t want to part with you so soon. I’ll see you again in no time, at least.”

After parting with Doris, I headed to the Second Palace.

I retrieved the item I had left with Maximilian: Dragon Slayer.

My body was still inert, showing no reaction to my presence.

* * *

Three days have passed. Doris and his Sky Knights had left for their home country, while Jin Katrin remained in Leonberg. He was very eager to find out more about the size and organization of the empire’s troops by putting the squeeze on the Marquis of Montpellier.

I meanwhile tried to persuade the king, and I did. I was finally given permission.

“Keep in mind. The true battlefield upon which you fight is not in Dotrin.”

He urged me over and over not to overdo it by battling too hard in foreign countries. Of course, holding back in a battle was just not my way, so the king’s words were just

a cliched way for him to say: “Take care of yourself.”

I told him that I knew it. I had a lot of things to prepare and wanted to get up early, but the king suddenly mentioned my uncle.

“I plan to elect Count Bale Balahard as a Paladin of the Kingdom.”

I was dazed as I heard this.

All of the countries upon the continent referred to their quad-chain knights as ‘paladins’, and it was only Leonberg which has replaced it with the term ‘champion.’

When the Royal Knights died four-hundred years ago on Mount Seori, they were posthumously elected as Paladins. It is said that the tradition was then formed to never give others the title so as to honor the noble sacrifice of those knights.

As far as I know, no one received the title of Paladin for all these four centuries except for those Royal knights, with the three Ekyon brothers among their ranks.

However, now the king has named my uncle as a Paladin.

Something welled up in my chest, and I managed not to express it outwardly.

“Vincent will love it,” was all I could say in a dull tone. I then stood up.

The king called after me, “I hope the term Paladin no longer refers only to the dead.”

I gave a bloody chuckle.

“I will see you again. And come and say goodbye before you leave.”

After that, I left the king’s palace. There was a lot to do.

I had to select the knights who were to go with me, and I had to make sure they were prepared. I also had to find a doppelganger to play my part while I was away.

Externally, it should not seem as if the Leonberg Kingdom is intervening in the empire’s war on Dotrin. It should also seem as if I haven’t left the kingdom.

External action was our last resort at this point; for now, things had to be done

covertly.

Even though I was busy, I didn't forget about the other important work I also had to do.

It was not three years since I have been engaged to the Elder High Elf Sigrun, and the promised day of our betrothal was fast approaching.

# CHAPTER 131
# DRAGON SLAYER (1)

Adelia wasn't the only one worried about His Highness these days. His recent behavior had indeed been strange. The prince was constantly moving as if he had a disease that would kill him once he stood still. Yet, he had suddenly stopped all his work and shut himself in his palace.

He didn't meet with anyone, and he didn't talk with anyone. He just closed his eyes all day and meditated.

Adelia was concerned about his health, so she made sure to pick out all the foodstuffs that the prince liked and brought them to him at every meal, but he didn't so much as put a morsel in his mouth.

Four days passed like that.

In the meantime, many people had visited the First Palace, all of them worried about the prince's sudden lapse into inactivity.

However, the prince still devoted himself to his meditation without even taking note of their visits. Four more days passed.

Adelia visited the prince's bed at dawn, as was her habit by now, yet this morning she stretched her eyes wide. The prince had closed his eyes and remained unmoving for nearly ten days, yet this morning he had stood from his seat for some reason.

"Your Highness!" Adelia ran to the prince with concern in her eyes as she started pouring out words. She told him that she worried a lot because he had skipped meals, sitting in his room all the time without making the slightest of movements.

The prince just quietly smiled as he heard Adelia talk.

His face was a bit emaciated, but his eyes shone clearer than ever before.

Adelia was relieved, yet her tears were sorrowful. The prince then asked for her help.

She helped him cleanse his face and then helped him get dressed.

Then the prince demanded that she bring him the armor that he used to wear.

Adelia bowed her head, went to fetch it, and helped the prince to put it on.

It had a base of leather, only being partially iron-plated. It was the armor of the northern knights which put mobility above protection.

The prince gave a satisfied laugh and praised Adelia for her hard work. She looked to the floor and then looked back at the prince. While wandering through the empire, the prince's hair, which he could barely manage before, had grown a lot longer.

She searched through the drawers in the bedchamber and pulled out a comb and a leather strap, and then she arranged the shy prince's hair with deft and skillful movements.

The prince praised her once more, saying that it felt better.

After being praised so repeatedly, Adelia smiled with a new, wide smile that she had never experienced before. It felt as if all the concern and annoyance that had made her heart sick for nearly ten days had disappeared.

The prince was now dressed in his uniform and armored. He went to stand before the two swords enshrined upon a table. After thinking for a while, he took up one of them.

The sword that the prince held was the royal sword rather than the sword that he always so enjoyed wielding. Adelia's heart pounded as she saw him hold that sword.

It had been only a while since they had left the bloody empire's territories, and they now stood within the royal palace, the best-defended place in a capital that was peaceful.

It seemed to Adelia as if the prince was about to head into a battle on his own.

Without knowing why she grabbed the prince's sleeve. The prince would have usually laughed mischievously and asked her what she was doing. Now he silently ran his hand through her hair and then grasped the hand holding his sleeve, giving it strength. She felt so anxious then.

‘Shhk,’ the prince gently made Adelia release his sleeve.

He then handed Adelia a letter and said that if he was not back by sunset the next day, she had to hand the letter over to a certain old man.

While Adelia stared blankly at him, the prince opened the door and left the room. Moments later, she got up and followed after him, but he had already disappeared.

She asked the knights who guarded the palace if they knew where the prince was. They gave insignificant replies, saying that the prince had gone for a walk and told them that no one was to follow him.

Adelia grasped onto the letter in her hand.

She wanted to open the seal and read its contents at once, but the prince’s order had been absolute. She anxiously clutched onto it and waited for the prince’s return.

However, day turned into night, and His Highness did not come back.

* * *

Carls Ulrich knocked on the door of the bedchamber.

‘Dok dok dok.’

“Your Highness, it’s Carls.”

No matter how many times he knocked and spoke, no answer was heard.

“I’m coming in.”

Carls carefully opened the door. He saw no one lying on the neat bed.

I’ve come on the off chance that he is here, thought Carls.

The prince had gone for a walk the day before and had not returned overnight. The possibility was slim, but Carls still came to check whether the prince had returned to his chambers without the knowledge of the palace knights.

But the prince was not there, after all. The bed was empty.

“What?” Carls frowned as he studied the room. In one corner, by the bed, he saw a crouching shadow. It was a woman who hugged her knees with both hands, her head buried between her arms.

“Sir Adelia?”

She was the prince’s closest friend, Adelia Bavaria.

It seems that she had been crouching there all night, waiting for the prince’s return. Carls softly clucked his tongue. Then the thought came that she might know the prince’s whereabouts, so he quietly approached and asked, “Do you know where His Highness has gone?”

Adelia shook her head, still burying it between her knees.

“Huh, maybe he was bored. Do you know whether he took a horse?”

Carls was not greatly concerned over the prince’s absence. He knew that the prince was a self-sufficient man and would not be in much danger within the kingdom’s borders.

He’s been in the palace for nearly ten days, so he probably went to get some fresh air, Carls thought. If we wait, he will return.

But when the sun set after another day and the moon rose into the center of the night sky, the prince was yet to return. Carls began to worry.

“How far did he walk?”

Carls had meanwhile learned that the sword-elves had gone with the prince, so he wondered if something had come up.

“Well, let me go check again.”

The sun had long since set, and yet the prince’s bed remained empty. Yet, there was Adelia Bavaria: Crouching in the same posture as the day before.

Carls sighed and made to leave the room when a deeply subdued voice caught his attention.

“Well, His Highness…”

Adelia had spoken. Carls turned around and saw that Adelia had lifted her head and was looking at him. Her face looked drawn out and tear-filled, and her nose was runny.

“H-He said that if he doesn’t come back after two days, then I had to give this letter to the Marquis of Bielefeld.”

Adelia fully awoke and pulled an envelope from under her arms, showing it to Carls.

Carls stiffened where he stood.

“What does that mean?” he asked with a frown, and Adelia started crying.

“His Highness seemed to be going out to fight someone.”

“Why are you only telling me now?!” Carls shouted as he heard this, unable to control his emotions.

After he had shouted so loudly, he looked at Adelia’s face and shut his mouth. He only then realized that he shouldn’t be shouting at this woman; she was extremely unstable.

“All right, Sir Adelia. Please follow me. We will go to His Majesty the King at once.”

Adelia stood, staggering, still clutching onto the letter left by the prince.

* * *

“Isn’t it possible that he left for Dotrin without giving word?” Siorin Kirgayen speculated. He and the rest of the delegation had been left behind as the prince and his knights rode through day and night. He was now pondering as to the whereabouts of the prince.

“I have already allowed the prince to go to Dotrin. There is no reason for him to leave so suddenly and silently,” the king said, dismissing Siorin’s theory.

“Isn’t he spending time in the entertainment districts of the capital after he had been gone for so long? I heard that he hasn’t shown that kind of behavior in recent years,

but in the past, he often went there," Siorin opined, but Maximilian shook his head.

"I have already sent people to check the entertainment houses in the city. No one said that they had seen him."

"Huh. Then where did he go?"

Everyone looked to one side of the hall, and their gazes fell on Adelia Bavaria. She stumbled back under their collective attention and then brought her hands to her chest, still clutching the envelope.

"She has the answer, but I can't get it," the king sighed. They had already tried many times, eager to read the letter. However, the obstinate woman refused even to obey the orders of the king, saying that the prince had instructed her to only hand the letter to the Marquis of Bielefeld.

The king had almost ordered his knights to take it from her by force but then decided against it as the marquis was on his way regardless, and the matter would soon be resolved.

However, because Bielefeld was running late today, the king was getting impatient. As he struggled to hold down his anxiety, he heard the voice of the palace knight guarding the door.

"The Marquis of Bielefeld has arrived."

Everyone waiting for Bielefeld's arrival stared at the door. The old man seemed hurried and somewhat disorganized, unlike usual. He strode in and bowed in front of the king.

"I rushed after receiving the order, but my carriage ran late, so I was delayed. I apologize, Your Majesty."

"Okay. Now get the letter."

After his rushed explanation, the old man bowed his head at the king's command and then reached his hand out toward Adelia.

"Give it to me."

When Adelia met the gaze of the marquis, she handed him the letter.

The Marquis immediately removed its seal and then began reading its contents aloud.

“I leave this letter, for I am unsure of what the future holds. My hope is that the marquis will never read these words-“

Bielefeld stopped speaking after hastily reciting that first sentence. His face had become as hard as stone. Bielefeld’s eyes moved quickly as he scanned the contents of the letter. Finally, after having read it, he handed it to Carls. Carls stepped onto the dais and handed the letter to the king.

“What message was given to you when His Highness handed you this letter?” the marquis asked Adelia.

“His Highness was calm, but it seemed as if he had a great battle awaiting him.”

The marquis closed his eyes as he heard those words.

The king had meanwhile read the letter, and it was handed to Maximilian. The king’s face didn’t look much different than Bielefeld’s. Maximilian read the letter with a stern expression.

I leave this letter, for I am unsure of what the future holds. My hope is that the marquis will never read these words if circumstances allow it to be so. Still, this must be done before anything else.

……

I have gained the answer to this in my own way. I believe that if I give my best, it will work. But my dear marquis, you know all too well: Our plans in this world do not necessarily work out as we intend.

……

In the past, I used to care only about myself. Lately, I have begun to feel a sense of responsibility, in my own way, at least. I have to do a lot of work, so my dear marquis, I will now ask you to do something while I am away.

……

Maximilian had become anxious by the fact that his brother, who was always full of confidence, had written such a letter with failure in mind.

He had struggled to suppress his anxiety, so much so that he stopped reading for a moment. The main content was about where and what should be done and what contingencies the marquis had to be attentive to. A request was written to make the proper arrangements.

It was only then that Maximilian understood why the faces of his father and the marquis had become so grave.

It was as if Adrian had left a will, yet it was not truly a will.

I'll return as soon as possible. No matter how late my return, I will be back, and then our work will start in earnest.

At the end of the letter, Adrian promised that he would make his return, and Maximilian believed it. His brother would definitely come back. Just like when he had appeared upon the defensive line on the Rhinethes with the northern reinforcements, Adrian would keep his promise again.

Carls Ulrich had checked the contents of the letter last and also stated that he believed the prince would make it back safely.

Still, the atmosphere in the hall was not pleasant.

"Sire!"

It was then that an urgent call came from outside the hall.

"Some of the knights who had gone out to search for His Highness have returned!"

"Let them enter!"

The knights who had halted before the open door now entered the hall and went to bow before the king's dais.

"There were signs of a great fight. The scene is within two hours by horse from the

capital!" one of them reported. As the king heard this, he stumbled back and sank onto his throne.

"The earth was scuffed and ripped asunder all over the place, and I swear by God that I have never seen anything of its like."

On behalf of the king and the marquis, who both seemed drained and out of spirit, Siorin asked the nights to elaborate.

"It's like… there was something huge," the knight answered in a trembling voice.

"The sight of the place… It's like a dragon has passed through there."

# CHAPTER 132
# DRAGON SLAYER (2)

The palace knights arrived at the scene.

“What is this?”

“What the hell happened here?”

Knights that would not even lift an eyebrow if a blade were to touch their throats all now had crushed expression.

The battle had not happened in front of them; they could only see its aftermath, the traces of what had occurred. Just that sight alone made the knights of the kingdom shake, shiver.

Normally, their commander would have shouted, “Get your minds straight! Regain your composures!” at this point, however, he remained silent.

Count Schmilde just looked at the site, then looked again, frowning all the while.

It wasn’t strange, for he was a quad-chain champion, one of a few in the kingdom. He was a strong man who had reached a higher level than any of those gathered there. That is why he was shaken more than anyone else: He understood what he was seeing. While his subordinates were merely overwhelmed by the strange sight before them, the Nogisa felt a sliver of fear.

“The sight of the place… It’s like a dragon has passed through there.”

Suha’s report, the knight who first saw the scene, flashed through the commander’s mind.

He was planning to strongly admonish the knight for giving a report that should have been more objective. Seeing this, he knew he couldn’t fault Suha anymore.

The ground was scuffed and scattered all over the place, and a huge rift ran through

the earth, through the center of the scene. If a dragon had crashed to the ground, it would've looked just like this.

The commander drew his sword and gathered mana to its tip, gathered more and more until he couldn't afford to push himself further.

And once the energy had reached its peak, Schmilde struck the ground with his Aura Blade.

'Bwaak!' and along with that roar, the ground rose.

"Hah, Chief!?" his men scattered away, surprised by his sudden behavior.

Not even deigning to notice, he just waited for the dust to settle, his face stern.

The ground was eventually revealed, as well as the devastating effects of his attack.

"Well," he almost moaned.

It was as he had expected, but the original ditch was still so much greater. Schmilde had expended almost half his mana in that single strike, and the hands that had gripped his sword were torn; blood was flowing freely. Yet, there was no comparison: He had only added a slight dent among all the scars that had been cleaved into the earth. To put it in an analogy: He had made the marks of a lizard swishing its tail in a place where it seemed a dragon had passed through. Even though the kingdom's most gifted champion had exerted all his might, that was the only mark that he could make. Schmilde couldn't even estimate how much force had to be applied to leave such a rift in the ground. He rather wanted to deny the sight altogether.

The scar he stared at looked like it was created by nature rather than the hand of any human; it seemed as if it was caused by a typhoon or something of its like.

He dearly wanted to believe that, but he couldn't. His instincts as a champion told him otherwise. These traces were left by no natural calamity—A tragedy had occurred here.

The Nogisa thought quietly. It had been impossible to imitate the furrows on the scene with his four rings, but if a knight with five rings had been here—Would it be possible then?

He didn't know.

This was something he had never experienced before, so all he could do was make vague guesses. If these scars had indeed been left by a human, then it might have been the missing first prince's work. Prince Adrian was perhaps the only penta-class knight born into the kingdom.

"No way…"

Count Schmilde, who had once taught swordsmanship and served as a tutor, could not think that the first prince had created such a scene. That was because the first prince was not a penta-chain knight, and even if he was surely not incompetent, he had only become a Sword Master by using a mana heart.

And that meant that it was an unknown third party who had created this ridiculous sight before him. A being with such tremendous power had come so near the capital, and no one had known of its presence. It felt as if a blade was touching Schmilde's throat. He would not have been able to use his power and to even beat such a being back if it came to the royal palace. The Nogisa would have stood helplessly by if whatever being which had cleaved these rents into the earth had come for the king.

"We won't pursue it," the commander of the palace knights ordered as he sheathed his sword, ordering a return to the palace in a voice stronger than ever before.

* * *

A corps of palace knights, led by the gifted Nogisa, had been sent out to study the field, but no knowledge was gained. Rather, they only brought more grim news.

At least a penta-level knight had intervened in that battle, and if the first prince had been the intended target, then his survival was unlikely. Had the man who made this report to the king not been a champion, then the king would have taken his life for even suggesting that Adrian was dead.

Still, it wasn't as if anger did not arise in the king's breast, so he still took his anger out on the palace knight commander.

"Go out and search again!"

However, Schmilde answered that he could not dare to let the palace knights leave

their posts again. He suggested that whatever danger had been there could still be in the vicinity of the capital, and so he urged the necessity of further strengthening the defenses of the royal palace.

It was a situation where the protectors of the kingdom were needed to keep the royal family safe. It would not be feasible to disperse the forces of the royal palace itself so far from the capital.

Besides, the Nogisa also pointed out, the palace knights were great knights, but they weren't very good trackers. It would be much more effective to scour the countryside with a hundred soldiers than a few enthusiastic knights. The king called up some of the Central Legion troops from the capital's garrison and ordered a large-scale search.

Among them, there was a ranger of Balahard, who was said to be good at tracking and reconnaissance.

"Dammit! Fuck! Can't I kip for even a fucking moment round here!?"

Ranger Jordan set out from the capital with many swear words, and the first prince's knights followed him. They finally reached the scene of battle.

The sight that was spread across the plain was enchanting in its terrifying scope. Even Jordan could not have imagined the tremendous scale of what had occurred here, and he was a man who had witnessed the might of the Warlord firsthand.

"Fuck it. This is a damned sight! It just looks so- Wrong, innit?" Jordan swore. "If the prince is really dead, I will find him, bring him back to life and curse him for getting into a fucking mess like this."

Jordan's words were disrespectful, blasphemous, but no one blamed him. They all felt the same way.

The first prince had always been selfish, but this time he had gone too far. If he was going to deal with such a strong enemy, why hadn't he told anyone? It was as if he hadn't thought it to a problem if he just disappeared without them aiding him in battle.

"You have served His Highness for much longer than I have, but you still don't know his character?" asked Siorin Kirgayen, who had insisted that he join the search team.

“I heard that the palace champion who checked this site confirmed that at least a penta-level knight had been present on the scene. Would you have been able to deal with something like that?” he added.

“It isn’t a matter of dealing with it or not!” Carls shouted.

Siorin clucked his tongue at Carls’s outburst.

“Okay Sir Carls, you are his protector. No matter who or what His Highness faces, you, his loyal knights, would sacrifice your lives to protect him. That’s why His Highness did not tell you.”

“What does that-“

“I heard that when Winter Castle fell, many knights offered up their lives to protect his unconscious Highness and that His Highness wept tears of blood at their loss.”

Those present weren’t fools, so they understood Siorin’s words, and they were captivated by his point of view. The reason that the prince, who they were were supposed to protect with their lives, had disappeared on his own was to protect them!

“Damn! Damn it! Fuck!” the well-mannered Carls, who had never been caught swearing in his entire life, now swore repeatedly. The other knights also burst into anger, and their anger was directed at themselves rather than toward anyone else.

They had been found lacking, weak, and because of that, the prince had left them, his protectors, behind in the capital. The world seemed to collapse around them, into a deep abyss of anger and self-doubt.

Seeing their despair, Siorin grew stern. He might even have garnered some resentment from his daughter for not telling her of the current peril, but he had no regrets. Arwen was facing an important moment in her life. Until her newly-woven rings had hardened, she had to refrain from releasing any mana, and she had to keep her mind and body cleansed and at peace. Considering that her fourth ring had already become unstable due to its constant use in the empire, Siorin knew that it had been the right choice not to deliver the news of the prince to her.

It will come as too great a shock to her, and maybe it could lead to the incorrect formation of the hard-to-weave fourth ring.

“Stop a while.” Ranger Jordan raised a single finger. “You’re distracting me, so let’s all be quiet-like.”

Everyone grew silent as they heard his nervous tone. If anyone could find the first prince’s whereabouts, it was the ranger. He was acting as he had just found something.

‘Snff! Snnnu!’ Jordan headed in a set direction, sniffing the air while touching the ground under his hand. Then he raised his head and set off running. The knights immediately followed him.

It was a deep, dark night, which made it difficult to pursue the trail effectively. The ranger ground to a halt and looked at the ground.

“Well.” He sank to the earth and started groping about on the ground, then found a trace of something, obviously having rediscovered the track.

The knights figured that Jordan would start moving again.

“Oh god damn it!”

But this time, the ranger didn’t move. He just shouted as he sank his face to the ground and started tapping the dirt.

“I will not give up. I will find him.”

Then he started crawling along the ground like a crazy person. It seemed as if Jordan was desperately struggling to find traces.

“You can do it, Jordan. You can do it, Jordan. Damn it, you can!”

The knights watched the ranger talk with himself, their faces stern. They all hoped Jordan’s struggles wouldn’t end in despair. And in the next moment, a woman who had been hanging to the back of the group suddenly stepped forward. It was Adelia Bavaria.

“Sir Adelia, step back. The clues could be dama-“

‘Hshoop!’

Carls had tried to hold her back in fear of her interfering with the ranger's work, but he pulled his hand away when an eerie energy flared up. A golden tracery remained where his hand had just been. Carls looked at the delicate woman's back.

She had drawn her sword, which was glowing golden, and she moved forward,

Carls raised his hands to restrain some of the knights who had stepped forward to hold her back.

It had been only for an instant, but he had looked into Adelia Bavaria's eyes. Two different hues of light had been swirling behind eyes that were empty, as if her soul had escaped her body.

No longer was she a delicate woman who searched for her master with tears streaking down her cheek and her nose running as she wept. The only thing that remained was a bloody-minded woman who had cried and cried until all her tears had dried away. Now, her eyes looked like grains of sand, uncaring and ancient.

She would surely burst into a rage if touched.

He had witnessed Adelia run amok in her madness several times. At such times, she moved only to spill blood and rend flesh, and no traces of her gentle and delicate nature were in evidence then.

Only the prince could control Adelia in such a state, and he was not here.

This was not a battlefield, yet only the prince could ever snap the woman out of her madness.

Carls drew his sword and looked at Adelia in silence. If she held any intention of harming the ranger, he would cut her down. The only hope they all now had rested in the skills of the ranger from Balahard.

However, the situation that Carls feared did not transpire.

Adelia passed Jordan, who was still crawling along the ground as he sought the trail. Then she suddenly halted and lowered her body. She grabbed a handful of dirt and brought it near her face.

At first glance, she only seemed to be looking at it, but then Carls noticed that she

was also smelling the earth.

After doing such a mysterious thing for a long time, Adelia suddenly threw the handful of dirt sway.

'Swa!'

Then the woman stood from the ground and set off at a run. It seemed that she had discovered something. The knights and the ranger ran after her.

For how long had they run? The entire wilderness had small stones and large rocks scattered all over. Adelia ground to a halt in front of one such pile of boulders and smaller rocks.

It seemed as if a person's body could be hidden under them. Adelia threw her sword to the side and started groaning, and she tried to heave a large rock to the side. Carls and the knights rushed in to help her.

'Kwadum'

The boulder fell to the ground.

'Kwud'

Another rock was rolled out of the way. The rock pile, which looked like a cairn, was dismantled stone by stone. And underneath them all, somebody's back appeared. The flesh had been cut and torn into rags and was red with caked blood. There were also patches of grass-green among the red.

"Ah!" Carls tried to roll away a large rock, his arms trembling. Before long, the boulder was pushed aside, and a bloody elf was revealed.

Her grass-green cloak had become ragged, and it was wrapped over her head.

The face that was revealed was that of a mute swords-elf, a being that they all knew well.

'Kidsha,' Adelia roughly pulled the ragged elf from the space. Something could be seen where she had lain. It was the person they had all so desperately been seeking.

Even though he was drenched in blood and breathing weakly, as if he would stop breathing at any moment, the first prince was there, still gripping onto his sword tightly.

“My Majesty!” Adelia screamed as she touched the prince’s cheeks. The knights rushed to the gap and carefully pulled the prince from the space.

‘Pluch,’ blood spilled from his many wounds. The prince sank to the ground and did not move.

Jordan fired the signal flare he held into the sky.

‘Fswhooo!’

“Come get him!”

‘Kshoo! Kshoo!’ fireworks loudly bloomed in the dark night sky.

‘Fwoop, Fwoop, Fwoop’ the sound of flapping wings was heard from some distance.

‘Bawooowoo! Bawooowooo!’ Jordan took his horn into his hand and ceaselessly blew it.

And soon after, a giant wyvern appeared and landed upon the earth.

“Huh?” the wyvern rider widened his eyes as he saw the stricken prince.

“No time to explain! Come on, take His Highness the Prince to the palace!” Carls shouted as he carried the first prince to the great wyvern. The prince and the wounded elf were strapped to a saddle. Then the clasp upon the elf’s cloak was loosened, and it was wrapped several layers around both of them. It could be disastrous if their body temperatures dropped.

“Go!”

“Then we’ll see you at the palace!” Jin Katrin shouted as he lifted his steed into the air and flew straight for the capital.

‘Fwoop, Fwoop!’

Adelia ran after the flying wyvern, and the ranger and knights also followed.

“Is His Highness well?”

When everyone arrived at the palace, the first prince had already received first aid.

“There was a royal command to let you in as soon as you arrived,” the palace knight guarding the door to the prince’s chamber said, allowing the party entrance. The door was opened, and they all looked toward the prince’s bed. Several people were gathered around him: The king with his stern face, the troubled queen, and the second prince, who knelt by the bed.

And in the middle of them all lay the first prince. His face was bloodless, and he seemed dead. He was covered by a white cloth, unmoving even as his mother clenched his hand.

As Carls saw that, all life drained from him.

“Well, Your Highness…”

In that shocked state, Carls headed to the bed.

“Highness!” the knights and ranger who followed him in cried as they rushed to the bed.

“Your Highness! Highness!”

They couldn’t form proper words as they kept calling to the prince.

“Ah, so noisy,” a weak voice was heard, so weak that it almost wasn’t a whisper.

“Uh!? Uh?” the dumbstruck knights raised their heads. The first prince looked at them with a drained face, only his eyeballs showing any sign of movement.

“Your Highness! Are you okay!?” Carls gazed at the prince with a bizarre face, not completely crying nor laughing.

“Does this look okay to you?”

The knights all sighed in relief as they heard the prince whisper, for they had thought

him to be dead or dying. They felt elated as they heard him talk. Now that their hearts were relieved, they asked as to the circumstances of his wounding.

“What the hell were you doing?”

At that, the prince managed to raise his lips into a slight smile.

“I was breaking my word.”

# CHAPTER 133
# DRAGON SLAYER (3)

Everyone was certainly curious about it all, but they didn't press me too hard due to concerns about my physical condition. Only the commander of the palace knights, with the permission of the king, confirmed a few facts with me to ensure the safety of the royal palace.

I was out of breath, but managed to give brief answers.

I told of the existence of the Elder High Elf Sigrun, the bad blood between the two of us, and our three years of being engaged.

People seldom believed that the angelic-looking elves were, in fact, a nasty breed. The traditions of the world held that elves should be glorified.

But that didn't mean that people disbelieved me; no, they took me at my word by virtue of the fact that I had built up enough trust. Compared to when I first awoke in the body of the prince, this was a great improvement – Back then, I would not have been believed even if I had said anything.

"That such a terrible being wanders the kingdom."

"I didn't even know that the elves were so dangerous."

All those around me were both burdened and shocked by my revelation of the power of the Elder High Elves. In particular, the commander of the palace knights, who was in charge of the capital's defenses, was very concerned about the existence of Sigrun. He was worried that she might come to the palace.

I let Count Stuttgart know that she would not be bothering the kingdom for a while.

He asked me why I said this.

"Because she got what she wanted."

The commander frowned at me. He didn't know the details, but he still asked me if it wouldn't be disastrous if such a terrible being had gotten what she had sought.

He was right – If she had gotten what she had truly wanted.

I wasn't foolish enough to give Sigrun her heart's desire.

There were many dance poems in the world, but not all such songs were auspicious and beneficial.

Although rare, some poems were ugly, harmful, ominous.

They represented greed, loss, and emptiness – Unholy songs that brought only ruin.

Those few who knew about their existence were wary of such poems, classing them as [Disastrous].

It was one of these unclean songs that I had handed to the Elder High Elf. The greedy faerie, who was unable to create her own poems, was fascinated by such an unfamiliar form of song that she had heard for the first time in her life.

She didn't even know of its terrible poison.

It was natural.

[Disastrous] poems were dancing poems, not traditions, and very few people knew of their existence in the past. And now that time has passed, there are none who remember the existence of [At the Time of Disaster].

"It's very nasty. She wanted to eat until she was full, but she instead ate rotten food," I said, as if it was a shame. However, none of the people around me really believed that I felt sorry.

"I can still see her face." Sigrun had truly wanted to sate herself.

The knights were silent around me, and a few cleared their throats.

"Then who the hell left that huge mark?" Count Stuttgart suddenly asked, as if just then remembering to do so.

I didn't answer him.

"Well, no way…"

The silence stretched on, and amazement arose in the eyes of the commander and his palace knights as they stared at me.

"That's enough," I said before he asked me again. I complained about my fatigue and promised everyone that I would answer their questions once I was able.

It wasn't that I was feeling unwell; rather, to feed the insane faerie of the poisoned poem, I had to contain its corruption within me. Even at that moment, the unclean energies still rested in my body. In order to prevent becoming like the ancient beings who were consumed by their own poetry and were finally so ruined, I had to focus on recovery and overcoming that poison I had allowed into myself.

I closed my eyes, and by doing that, I made it clear that everyone should leave my room.

"If you have anything to ask, you must wait until he recovers. There will be plenty of time for all of you to talk, so it is better if everyone leaves for now," the queen said, coming to my aid.

I heard the sound of doors opening and closing, and after a while, not even footsteps were to be heard. As I opened my eyes, I saw Adelia sitting on my bed. It has been only a few days since she last saw me, yet her face showed her great hurt and stress.

She and I were bound by the relationship between [Domination] and [Subordination], so I could only guess at the anxiety she must have felt.

She must have been so nervous when I had not returned – Perhaps her nastier traits had even been triggered. Adelia jerked and then sneakily grabbed my hand.

Seeing my face, she stiffened.

"Hirck," with a bizarre groan, I became restless and avoided her gaze, yet I did not let go of her hand. And as I endured and endured, lapsing into unconsciousness and then snapping awake once more, Adelia was always by my side, always giving me her consistent support.

Seeing her face, seeing her there, somehow reassured my heart every time, so much so that I could sink back into sleep.

* * *

I was bedridden and near-comatose for two days.

When I got up, I immediately asked Adelia about Gunn's progress. I had been told that she was brought here with me. She had suffered serious injuries, but she had at least entered a recovery phase. Still, I would feel more relieved if I could see Gunn's face.

People opposed me at once. They said that I couldn't walk well by myself with the state my body was in. They said that I was trembling, unsteady, and could not go anywhere.

However, I did not bend back, and eventually, the knights decided to move Gunn into the room next door to mine. I was awoken at night by a knight reporting that the transfer was done. With Adelia's support, I hobbled into the adjoining room.

There was a woman lying on the bed with half her face and body covered in bandages, and I could only sigh as I saw the poor half-elf, so full of scars and wounds that barely any of her bare skin could be seen.

The sound of them crying like wounded beasts still rang so vivid in my ears and resounded so clearly in my mind; those screams of the dying half-elves.

"AAH! AAH! AAAH!"

* * *

"Hah! Hargh! Ha!" the half-elves roared like beasts as they rushed at Sigrun.

Their sudden charge had surprised me, panicked me. Sigrun reacted the same.

The only difference was that her anger was far greater than her surprise.

"You dare?" And with those cold words, she fixed her sword and slashed out. It wasn't even a sword dance: Sigrun had merely slashed her blade from top to bottom and again from left to right.

‘Scheek!’ With that strike alone, the bodies of the swords-elves were torn to pieces. However, they continued to rush at Sigrun. I stared at the scene blankly. My head swirled and turned after I had forcibly used the power of the poetry.

Obviously, I had ordered the half-elves to wait nearby, and they had never before violated my orders. So why the hell were they charging to their deaths in such a manner?

I couldn’t understand it.

“Stop!” I shouted as I watched a half-elf, whose right arm had been severed by Sigrun’s sword, grab his blade into his left hand, and rush to her. He had barely swung his sword when Sigrun killed him. Sigrun then gripped her sword in both hands as she held it out at the ready.

“Stop it!” I shouted again, but the swords-elves did not listen to me.

“Why?” I was trying to step up to the fight, but one of them blocked me off.

“Shhh,” Gunn said as she smiled gently and wiped the blood from my mouth.

(Escape), she implored me. Only after seeing her hand signals did I realize why the half-elves were so recklessly rushing at Sigrun.

They burned with a fury in the very core of their beings.

I couldn’t stand seeing it anymore, letting it happen, so I shouted, “You idiots! I can face her on my own! Go! Step Back!”

Gunn shook her head.

(She Already Decided)

Gunn’s gestures accelerated.

(Death Worse Than Death)

She told me that Sigrun would never let me go easily. I knew it too. I had prepared myself for it.

I had prepared enough gifts for the greedy Elder High Elf to feel as if she was full. I had at least possessed enough power to protect myself from the poison of my gift.

I had done it.

Gunn gestured that it was insufficient.

As she gestured, she grabbed my cheeks and, for the first time ever, spoke to me. Her pronunciation was distorted, stunted, as her tongue had been cut from her mouth.

"I'm talking about the original song. Sigrun thinks to keep you for herself forever," I think Gunn roughly said this. And even at that moment, the screams of the swords-elves continued.

"AAH! AAH! AAAH!"

They cried out like crippled animals as they died before my eyes.

"Why!" I asked as I witnessed such death.

"Revenge," Gunn said to me.

(This To Protect You Same Time Their Revenge)

The moment that I understood it, I was dazed.

Up till then, I had never known what the half-elves were thinking, what they were like. And I hadn't been interested in knowing. For me, they were just daggers in the dark.

My weapon against evil elves.

I had been so blind; I had forgotten what it meant that only half of the blood that flowed through their veins was elven. They were the ill-fated people whose tongues were cut out by the owner, who eventually abandoned them. I had behaved just like their former master; I had exploited them.

Their fate was just like mine had been in ages past.

The sword is deprived of all glory and has to remain a mere blade, a tool that is used

but never named, never praised, or remembered.

“Aaahhh!” a swords-elf was cut along her waist, and I did not even know her name. She clutched at the wound with her slender hand, cried out, and charged at Sigrun.

“Quickly!”

From every quarter, garbled, tongueless, and incomprehensible screams erupted.

Gunn grabbed onto me. I had uttered poems one after the other; I had also inhaled the poison of those [Disastrous] songs. It would take some time for the broken flow of mana to realign itself within me. I struggled as Gunn dragged me away.

I felt a hideous sensation of deja vu then, for it was a sight that I had seen before.

And the memory suddenly rushed into my mind.

Winter Castle. Warlord. Uncle Bale, and the knights… the knights…

The memory of that day stirred within my mind, of when I had been forced to flee because of my lack of strength, forced to leave my uncle to face his death.

But this day was not the same: Sigrun was not the Warlord, and her greed and power were greater by far. Sigrun began striding toward Gunn and me.

Any half-elf who barred her way was cut down.

Now only three swords-elves remained, Gunn included.

The two others began their sword dance and moved in toward Sigrun.

Before their sad, tongueless humming could reach a crescendo, Sigrun’s sword flashed.

‘Swuck!’

The first one’s arms were severed.

‘Stluk!’

The other sank to the ground as his legs were cut off.

'Qlup! Qlup!'

Sigrun's blade pierced their hearts.

"Ah…" Gunn swiveled around. I knew that she would not be able to defeat the Elder High Elf.

I grabbed onto Gunn and pushed her away.

"Ah! Ahhhhh!"

It was the first time she ever got angry at me.

It was foolish to face a monster that you couldn't hope to fight against, even if you're fine with dying. And Gunn's eyes told me she was ready to die for me.

I shook my head at her.

"I can't escape anyway, Gunn. And there is no need for me to run."

I lamented, looking at the bodies of the slain swords-elves.

"I'd rather speak than run."

No, their deaths weren't their fault. This was my battle, and I didn't realize what would happen if I brought the half-elves with me.

"No, if only I had realized it earlier."

If only I had known how much they hungered for revenge. If only I had known that the hatred was set so deep into their marrow that they would throw their lives away like this.

If I had known, none of them would have died.

I thrust out my chin and fixed my sword before me.

Sigrun approached, drenched in blood.

She smiled as she reached out to me and whispered in an angelic voice, “Let’s go together.”

I shook my head and raised my sword up high overhead.

What existed in the corners of Sigrun’s crescent-shaped eyes was utter arrogance and ridicule.

“There’s nothing you can do. The outcome does not change,” she told me.

“You don’t know that. I have yet to pay my price.”

As I spoke, Sigrun took a step toward me.

I met her gaze.

‘Qlschuup!’ and I stabbed the sword into my stomach – Dragon Slayer, my true body.

Sigrun’s eyes stretched wide. I groaned as my body grew stiff.

The world stopped moving, and in that motionless world, I began whispering.

“Here I sing with my red blood”

It was a song that had not left any lips for many ages.

“Of the ancient winter, the frozen world”

“Of the lord of storm and frost”

A magical poem that forcibly awakened the sword that deeply slumbered by offering my life to it.

“Answer, Gruhorn!”

It was a song of oath.

‘Wluschwlusch,’ my true body, piercing my stomach – Gruhorn, Dragon Slayer – began to ravenously feast upon my blood.

I gave strength to both my hands and pulled the sword free.

“That hurts bad-“

There was not a drop of blood. I wasn’t sure if my true body had consumed all the blood, or whether it was because the wound was frozen.

It didn’t even matter.

The only thing that now mattered was the Elder High Elf before me.

“Look clearly, Elder High Elf,” I said as I looked at Sigrun, a being stiffened by shock.

“This is what you’ve been hoping for.”

I raised my sword high.

“Let’s dance the dance of the Dragon Slayer!”

I lowered my blade, readied it, and in my heart, I sang the song that killed Gwangryong.

# CHAPTER 134
# MERCENARY OF THE TWIN SWORDS (1)

The world split as the tip of my sword cleaved into it. The sky and earth were both cut atwain. There was no dust: Everything caught in the sword's arc froze.

In the middle of it was Sigrun, and the sword that the faeries had forged for their noble was half-broken, while her grass-green cloak was torn into rags.

Her mysterious-looking silver hair was in disarray while her body was half-frozen, frosty.

Sigrun put her hand to her forehead and then stared at the blood that came upon it.

Then suddenly, she frowned, and it was an unfamiliar expression for her to have.

At first glance, it seemed as if she didn't understand the situation, and when she glanced at the hand again, she seemed truly lost. Both states were true.

Suddenly, Sigrun started to laugh as he pressed her hand to her forehead once more.

"Oh, really. This is the best."

Her voice sounded as if she was truly having fun, and then I felt it: A great energy began raging around her. What was in that terrible madness? A monster that has finally reached the level of [mythic] after living for a thousand years.

Her great presence pressed in on me.

"Wow…"

As I turned my head, I saw Gunn's face, her eyes wide. The swords-elf that was prepared to die no longer existed; all that was left was a poor half-elf, terrified as she watched the terrible battle. Her face was tear-filled and her nose running, and she trembled. Her shaking became even more desperate while she still tightly clung to the hem of my shirt.

I stepped forward in silence, and a great energy arose from my body. It was the gift of my true body that I had borrowed after giving it a portion of my life.

The [myth] of the faerie and the [myth] of the magic sword shook, clashed as we sought to crush one another.

'Laugh for now. It won't last long.'

Unlike the Elder High Elf, who has fully developed her [mythic] power, mine was only being borrowed from Dragon Slayer for a while.

"Run away," I ordered Gunn as I fixed my sword.

Today's fight was between Sigrun and me, and I would not be deterred.

Gunn stumbled back.

Sigrun's laughter suddenly stopped, and her unsmiling face and snake-like eyes swiveled as they turned towards Gunn. I stepped up and blocked Sigrun's view.

"Was there any intention of keeping your promise from the start?"

The covenant between the Elder High Elf and me was about equal cooperation. Sigrun violated this and tried to keep me, posses me, so she had no right to ask anything from me any longer.

"The covenant is broken," I declared.

That single statement was enough. Her superiority over me had been undermined. When I started to press in on her with my power, she started shaking. This was a fitting price for one who had forsaken the covenant to pay.

"Go back, elf," I declared, for this was a legitimate right given to those who were party to the covenant. Sigrun's outing was over, yet she didn't answer.

She just lifted her broken silver sword.

And at the same time, her energy became more unstable. Nonetheless, her presence was still overwhelming; she was still looking down upon the world from a high point. I now knew that her powers had given her the confidence to break the covenant

without hesitation.

She had been willing to pay for some of the thousand years of her life; she had obviously thought that I was worth it.

And it was true: Sigrun was capable of it- If the covenant she would break was only the one between the two of us.

“The faeries go to into the forests, and the dwarves enter the world below.”

I recited part of the Declaration of the End of the Great War, proclaimed before the dwarves and elves. Sigrun still had no answer. Rather, she approached me with long strides.

Yet, she was only able to take three steps when she was forced to a stop.

I looked at her and said coldly, “Go back to the forest, faerie.”

Sigrun looked at me, and her eyes were full of surprise.

And at the same time, her power became insanely unstable. As if it was building up momentum to scatter at any moment.

“How?” the Elder High Elf asked as she looked at me, unsure as to how I had bound her with such unprecedented force. Instead of answering, I told her to leave once more.

“This is not where you belong.”

I didn’t ask her that as a favor or as the human Adrian Leonberger. I did it as the observer who had seen the beginning and end of the Great War. An order had been given to the faeries by me, the observer, and they had pledged to abide by it at the war’s closing.

“Go into the forest.”

At that moment, she looked anxious. She gripped her sword and roused a wave of energy, but something happened before she could even react to it.

‘Zeng!’

The sword in Sigrun's hand was smashed into hundreds, thousands of fragments that scattered away. Yet, there came a surge of energy and the fragments spun toward me. It was too abrupt a thing to block, and they were too spread out and close to dodge.

I was defenseless, exposed to the hail of fragments from Sigrun's sundered sword, and as I felt the first of the silver fragments penetrate me, Gunn blocked them off. She had jumped in front of me.

"Ahhhh…"

Blood poured from the half-elf that embraced me.

"Why, Gunn!?"

Her face became even more drawn and tired. My eyes hurt as I saw the contrast of crimson blood flowing down her pale face, and she gazed at me with that red visage.

The abominable voice of Sigrun spoke up.

"Hey, what did you think would happen when you broke my sword like this?"

My anger was extreme, and I swung my sword at her with all my might.

'Qluap-'

At that moment, my stomach wound that had been frozen, sealed, opened up.

My damned body, my damned body… Betrayed me.

But in the end, I still managed to swing my sword all the way. That was it.

I lost consciousness, and when I awoke, I was in the royal palace.

* * *

I sighed as I looked at Gunn.

It was said that the search team had found me in a crack under a pile of stones somewhere on the plain. I presumed that even with her lethal wounds, Gunn had desperately dragged me away and hidden me, fearing that Sigrun would change her

mind. Maybe there was a rockfall after that.

I did not witness it, but the fear that Gunn felt at the time must have truly been great.

“Hufoo,” I sighed. To be honest, I wouldn’t have faced the worst eventuality, even if the swords-elves did not intervene. I had set enough contingencies in place.

However, the half-elves had not known that, so they had given their lives to protect me.

It was a pity.

I didn’t know their names, and I never knew their faces. I had always only seen that part of their faces not obscured by their hoods. I couldn’t be sad, I couldn’t mourn them as individuals – And that troubled me the most.

I could not properly mourn those who had freely given their lives for me, because I never knew them. I looked at Gunn again. They say that her wounds are serious, and even if she wakes up, she might never wield a blade again.

I couldn’t even dare to guess how she would feel once she awoke.

I had merely done what I had to do, but I was determined to do my best so that the half-elf could live only for herself for the rest of her life.

I decided I would call in the four swords-elves who had been tasked to watch Montpellier.

I looked at Gunn in silence and then told the maid beside her, “Take care of her with great diligence, and when she wakes up, give her this message…”

When I was done, I headed to my room with Adelia’s help.

A day passed, and Gunn had still not wakened. The four half-elves who had watched over Montpellier came to me, and I gave them the news of the other swords-elves’ fate.

They said nothing, merely listening intently.

It seemed that the half-elves, who had lived their lives like livestock under Sigrun,

did not know that they should mourn the death of their comrades. Only their somewhat altered rate of breathing showed me that they were slightly agitated.

“Can you show me your faces?” I said with a sigh, asking them to remove their hoods.

They flipped the hoods off their cloaks without hesitation.

“Ah…” I sighed.

They had different hair colors, different faces – not one looked the same. They were true individuals, yet I had never thought of them like that. I just saw their green hoods and cloaks.

I asked them their names, and they looked at me with distant gazes.

It was because they did not know how to reveal their names: Their tongues had been cut out. They could not speak.

“Even if you just shape them with your mouths.”

As they heard me, they started moving their lips.

The half-elf with the lively expression was Yonaen.

Gionne was the one who looked so calm.

The half-elf named Harun had light brown hair and a young face.

Ibir had pale-golden, curly hair and an ivory face.

“Yonaen, Gionne, Harun, and Ibir.”

When I spoke their names, the half-elves looked away with awkward faces. I quickly told them, “You guys are now free. If there is anything I can do for you, tell me now.”

But those who had lived as slaves for all their lives had forgotten how to decide for themselves.

They looked at me with depressed faces, as if I had abandoned them.

It seems like they needed some time. They had to become human again after they had lived like slaves, cattle, and daggers in the dark.

It wouldn't be impossible. If a guy like me managed to live as a person, there was no reason that they couldn't.

After I had asked for the names of the half-elves who had died for me, I told them that they could take an indefinite period of rest.

The surveillance of the Marquis of Montpellier would be left to someone else. It wouldn't be possible to have him watched as covertly as before, but it would still be enough to prevent the marquis from wandering away. Once the half-elves left me, the Marquis of Bielefeld came.

We spoke for a while until we chanced upon the topic of the half-elves.

The marquis said he would commission a monument to be erected with the names of the fallen half-elves to commemorate them. He went on to say that this would become a symbol for the remaining half-elves that we would fully support them so that they could start their lives anew.

"Thanks."

The Marquis of Bielefeld, while not a swordsman, had taught me much about things that I did not know of. As I lay on my bed, I bowed my head to him in gratitude.

The marquis laughed, saying that he understood it all too well, as he had four pretty daughters who he had raised.

Since those events, I have been lying on my bed, dedicating myself to recovery.

Soon afterward, Gunn woke up, and I gave her her freedom.

Yet, she stubbornly endured by saying she would remain with me.

Fortunately, she had recovered well and had no crippling injuries, so I knighted her in short order. And I said that she no longer had to cover her face; she could now proudly walk around as Sir Gunn.

It was very awkward for her at first, baring her face, but she quickly adapted to it

and began following me with that unique, expressionless face of hers.

In fact, not one of us had changed much from before our meeting with Sigrun. All that I guessed had changed was that Gunn had shown her face and now served me in another capacity.

Yet, the difference proved bigger than I thought.

When I had placed Gunn in the care of Adelia, so that she could get used to her duty as a knight, the palace knights made fun of it. They said that it was like a duckling waddling after a mother duck.

I was having such a peaceful time, but an emergency soon reared itself from outside the capital.

“The Imperial Army has attacked the border fortress of the Dotrin Kingdom!”

By that time, all the unclean energy left in my body had disappeared, and the wound in my stomach has healed considerably.

There was no reason to hesitate, so I shook myself, got up from the bed – And I was ready.

Then I went to the king and told him, “I’ll be back.”

The king almost backtracked on his permission and tried to persuade me to stay several times for some reason, yet I endured, stubborn.

I realized it after my desperate confrontation with Sigrun: I was still weak, and there was a great need to grow further. I had to make sure that the evil Elder High Elf paid for the blood of the swords-elves. Next time, I didn’t want to borrow the power of my true body in exchange for my blood.

“This is the last time I allow you to leave the borders.”

In the end, the king allowed me to go to Dotrin.

“I thought you would wait until the war was over,” Jin Katrin whispered to me, figuring that we might be too late. I told him that I had to go somewhere first, making us even later.

Jin almost jumped and asked me if I thought his wyvern was a stagecoach.

While shamelessly swearing, he finally accepted my request.

We flew to the north, returned to the capital, and then headed for Dotrin.

“We’re here.”

I looked down as I heard Jin say this.

The sky was covered with dark clouds, and the visibility was bad. All I could see was a hazy world, which was occasionally revealed under hazy clouds.

Yet, I still knew: We have reached the battlefield.

The faint scent of blood mixing with the wind tickled my nose.

# CHAPTER 135
# MERCENARY OF THE TWIN SWORDS (2)

Jin Katrin left the battlefield and headed east.

“Aren’t we going to help them?” I asked.

“The war is not yet that urgent. It’s not yet time for the Knights of the Sky to come to the fore,” Jin replied, saying that the existence of the wyverns will only be revealed later.

“We have already flown into the empire. They must know of the wyverns.”

“If Your Highness had not been so stubborn, I would never have taken such undue risks. So thank you, Your Highness.”

Jin responded to me in such a manner, saying that at least I had come to Dotrin to pay off my debt. As we flew on the wyvern, we passed over battlefields several times. At such times, I remained silent as I studied the ground below.

When I listened, it seemed that I could hear the sounds of battle. Screams of fury and death resonated in my mind like hallucinations.

“Hah, relax a little. You’re breathing into my ears,” Jin said as he looked at me. It seems that my breath had become short without my notice.

Then I snapped awake and realized my ass was half-off the saddle. With an embarrassed face, I shifted it back onto the saddle, yet contrary to my will, my ass started to lift once more, so great was my curiosity of the world below.

“How is it that Your Highness is always the same?” Jin said and shook his head. All the while, the wyvern flew east. The sounds of battle, which had set my heart a-beating, faded and then disappeared completely.

I regretted that my appetite for battle had not been sated, yet my mood cleared as the cloud cover cleared. The territories of the Dotrin Kingdom was lush with

greenery and high and low ridges that stretched on endlessly below us.

I admired the scenery.

“How is it?” Jin Katrin asked me, his face filled with pride.

“It’s awesome,” I said with a nod, expressing my true feelings.

“It is easy to block passage, making it difficult for the enemy to come through. There are many places to launch ambushes from, so even if they march for a day, they won’t come far. There is no fortress more heavenly,” I added, giving my heartfelt appraisal of the land.

“Why?” asked Jin with a deep frown.

When I asked him if there was something wrong with my answer, he looked tired and told me, “When you open your mouth, you only talk about fighting and killing.”

“I came here to fight. But let’s not talk about war, then. Tell me something else.”

“Wouldn’t the normal response be to admire Dotrin’s great forests?”

“Yes, all those trees look majestic,” I said with confidence, and Jin just kept staring at me.

After that, he shut his mouth and said nothing more. Even after I had praised the forests that his country was so proud of, I couldn’t figure out whether he took it for sarcasm and was hurt by my words, or whether there was another reason.

It seemed like the latter possibility to me.

At a certain point, the wyvern banked around and then started hovering around the same spot.

It was weird that it did this, so I touched Jin’s back. I could see he was more upset than was necessary as he stared at me. Yet, his face looked like a cow that had been led to an abattoir.

When I asked him why we were hovering, he gave no answer. He simply pulled on the wyvern’s reigns and guided the beast into a descent, all in silence.

It was incomprehensible.

The wyvern still had some power to its wings, and normally, we would still have flown on for a while. Yet, Jin Katrin declared that we would rest at the foot of a mountain that was unknown to me.

“Get off.”

When the wyvern touched down upon the ground, the knights who had been drooping, exhausted, raised their heads. After having sat so long a time on the crude saddles that had been installed on the rear mounting, they jumped from the beast in a flash.

“Woah! Wow!” Gwain groaned as he bent his back and massaged it. His two comrades jumped down after him.

“I might be a noble, but after flying so much, I’m just going to spend the rest of my life comfortably beneath this mountain,” said Bernardo Eli, who had constantly been complaining about the journey.

Gunn, whose body has not yet fully recovered, remained silent as she leaned against a tree trunk.

Only Adelia seemed fine as she hustled and bustled, preparing our camp.

Everyone seemed to have had a hard time flying.

I chuckled as I looked at them and then sat down by the campfire.

“Well.”

During the flight, I had grabbed a strand of hair that had strayed into my eyes. It was black hair, not the familiar golden color.

“It looks as if the dye holds.”

I was amazed.

Before leaving the capital, several steps were taken to avoid revealing our identities.

We prepared iron helms that would hide our faces, and we had also changed our hair colors.

In this task, Gunn showed unexpected proficiency. Even if only half an elf, she was still an elf, so she was good at gathering plants and preparing elixirs. Although she did not possess the subtle skills of the elves of Mistletoe Forest, who dealt with the essence of the forest itself, she could make simple mixtures such as hair dye.

And as a result, I now had black hair.

Adelia kept touching her hair, which blazed with an intense red hue instead of its normal light-brown coloration.

I felt that this intense hair color didn't fit me, but I cared little: So long as it hid my true hair color and looked believable enough. On Adelia's part, her mild nature was counteracted by her new red head, so it fitted in well with our intention of concealing our identities.

Then I recalled that her ancestor, Agnes, had just the same red her as she.

I laughed at those old memories.

If I came to see Adelia run wild on the battlefield, it would be nice, as if reliving the old days. I laughed by myself, then noticed Jin Katrin, who seemed a bit lost.

Sitting a little further away from the party, he was immersed in a world of his own. It seemed as if he kept scolding himself, non-stop. There were words that weren't Leonbergian that I managed to understand, like "Tonight is the last night," or "Even now, I can't sleep well."

When I asked him what he meant, he did not give me a single answer.

The sun, which had squatted in the middle of the sky when we landed, tilted down until night came at long last.

"Well?"

The wyvern had been snoring with a 'Karrrreung, Karrrreung,' yet it now, all of a sudden, raised its head. I studied the shadows of the forest to see if some mountain beast was stalking us, but I didn't notice any signs.

Then I suddenly felt a strange premonition and looked up at the sky.

And they appeared: Wyverns with their great wings spread wide. These were obviously Sky Knights.

I frowned.

Ten wyverns were circling our camp – as if surrounding us. I was worried by the faint aura of hostility that I could feel flowing in from the knights above us.

My party also looked at the sky, hands on their swords, also seeming to sense the animosity.

“Stay your blades. These are the kingdom’s wyvern knights,” Jin Katrin cautioned us.

“We may keep our blades, but I’m sensing hostility from them,” Gwain said.

“They are not here to harm you. They just-,” and Jin chewed on his lip, “They came here to get me.”

“What?”

At that moment, a loud shout came from the sky.

“The eldest son of the Duke of Katrin, Jin, accept the royal judgment!”

“They said they would solve it on their own, and I was a fool to believe it,” Jin grumbled and then sighed. He went forward and knelt on one knee.

“I am Jin, the eldest son of Duke Katrin. I give myself to the will of the king!”

“We are dismissing Jin Katrin from all positions at the present time. Jin Katrin will have to appear before a disciplinary committee as soon as possible,” the wyvern knight delivered the king’s decree in an abstracted tone, then added, “We will take you straight to the royal castle.”

The knight’s voice was resolute.

* * *

We arrived there in the deep of night, my knights and me being 'politely' guided into Dotrin's castle. We weren't even able to see what the castle looked like. And once inside, I met Doris's brother.

"Nice to meet you. Kislan Dotrin."

The man who introduced himself as the second prince of the kingdom was a bit short, with light brown hair, and he looked just like his younger brother.

If there was a difference, it was that the younger brother had an impression that was like a lively little boy, whereas the older brother gave of an intellectual and somewhat weak aura.

He stood from his seat and welcomed the descendant of the Dragon Slayer, thanked me for my help in difficult times: In short, Kislan poured out a formal greeting.

Then I asked him why Jin was taken.

"There was a grave error in my brother's judgment in carrying out such missions in the empire, and he was given a probationary order for his actions. Jin Katrin, as his attendant, will soon be disciplined, forced to take responsibility for failing to prevent it."

I could intuitively see that I was also being blamed for the actions of Doris and Jin, so I checked with Kislan.

His response was neither negative nor positive. He only asked for patience, saying that he could not tell outsiders the details of the kingdom's internal affairs.

"When the day dawns bright, Your Highness will find out such things, so let us all rest for the night."

Doris's brother left the room, and I spent my first night in the royal castle with a troubled mind.

The day did dawn bright, and soon enough, a messenger came.

"His Majesty has invited you to breakfast."

Bernardo Eli, who was killing time in my room, frowned. He spoke.

“It has been said that it is sufficient to serve a meal only once the sun has set, for then all can freely share their hearts and hearths. So if your guests will only be in your hall for a short while, you serve them their meal once the sun has bestridden the sky.”

Even after living for centuries, it was the first time that I had heard such a proverb.

“It is an informal visit and one that should be kept confidential. It is also the case that we have been brought here like sinners. If this matter is not resolved, we might not be esteemed in their considerations. It has been made clear that the King of Dotrin ignores our kingdom. Even so, aren’t we the people who have come to aid Dotrin?” I asked.

“Then you respect their royal family so much that you held back?”

“No. But why do you know old parables and proverbs so well?”

Bernardo coughed, turning his head away and saying that he didn’t know.

I thought about it as much as I could and said that he only gave me a pinch of something greater. I got up from my seat and chuckled as I watched Bernardo snarl.

“Guide me,” I said to the messenger, who had turned his head away as if hearing nothing of our exchange. He bowed his head and opened the door. I followed the messenger as we made our way through the castle.

On the way to the dining room, I saw no common attendants in the hallway. Thanks to this, I was able to reach the hall without anyone’s notice.

“Your Majesty, he has arrived,” the messenger said as he stood by the door.

A heavy voice came from within, “Enter.”

The door was opened.

The interior was quite dark, and there was a long, rectangular table. And the King of Dotrin sat at its end. He had broad shoulders, his mouth was stubbornly set, and his eyes were strong.

He did look a bit embarrassed, yet he was dignified, and though he did not flaunt his

authority, his was a presence that none could ignore.

The king was ferocious rather than mild, a general who commanded his realm rather than a monarch who ruled from a throne.

He was a giant and a superman.

And he was the strongest man I have met since waking, having reached the highest place than any other I knew of. The nape of my neck grew stiff as energy rose in my body.

Only then did the king turn his head toward me.

Our gazes met.

'Sha,' he gestured with his hand, footsteps sounded, and the dining room's door was closed.

'Thud-'

The king stared at me. Anyone would have lowered their head by just encountering his overbearing presence, but I wasn't just quite anyone. Already, I was a usurper who had overthrown a king and claimed his throne.

If this man was a king, then so was I.

If he was a superman who had crossed the barrier, then I was also a superman.

I provocatively raised my chin and looked at the king.

The king's thick eyebrows wriggled.

He jumped up from his seat, stepped up to me, and said, "I thought the name of the lion who commands the north was an ancient, long-gone name."

There existed a deep admiration for me in the voice of this king.

"Now I know that's not the case."

He reached out to me, and I clasped his hand.

“Nice to meet you, young lion of the Leonberger family.”

‘Graok,’ his grip seemed to be made of iron as we shook his hands, and then I realized something, now that I stood facing him: The king was much shorter than I had expected.

When I had first seen him, he looked so big, like a giant. In actual fact, he was barely tall enough to reach the tip of my nose. Nevertheless, he was looking down upon all the world.

I was amazed: Here was the ideal figure that I wished the descendants of the Lion, of Gruhorn, to be like, standing right in front of me.

“Amazing. It’s incredible,” he muttered.

And as much as I admired the king could I see that he was also impressed by the sight of me.

“The Leonberg Kingdom has raised a monster,” came his compliment.

I laughed at that. In truth, the kingdom didn’t raise me.

No, I was raising a kingdom.

# CHAPTER 136
# MERCENARY OF THE TWIN SWORDS (3)

The king of Dotrin was an angry man.

He didn't hesitate to speak, and once he spoke, there was nothing that he hid.

Through him, I learned of the circumstances that I had been unaware of up till then.

Among them was the tale of Doris.

As things stood, the Knights of the Sky should only appear at the decisive moment, yet Doris had taken the secret weapon and employed it by his own will. It was a matter of the wrong thing, at wrong time.

I opined that the concerns were not so grave, as we had made sure not to be witnessed when we flew, but the king clearly expressed his discomfort, saying that it had been foolish to take the wyverns all across the empire. He added that it would not be strange if the emperor of Burgundy, whose family had not forgotten the old ways, has already managed to link the wyverns with the Leonberg delegation.

"Of course, there is a lot of room left for you to obfuscate facts because you created a separate track overland."

The king of Dotrin thought that me splitting the delegation and making the soldiers escape through the countryside had been a smokescreen operation on my part. In actual fact, I had just figured that the imperial knights would not pay much attention to the soldiers, so I commanded them to march to safety. I had unintentionally confused the empire's information network by ordering that.

The king said that he had been unsure whether to praise me for my feats or punish me for the mistakes made by my delegation.

"Until I saw you directly with my own eyes," and here the king's expression softened, "I didn't believe it."

His depthless eyes studied me.

“Even if you played a part in exposing the Knights of the Sky so early, my kingdom must still obtain allies.”

I laid back in my chair and watched the king.

“So, am I enough?” I asked him now that he had met me.

“I think you’re enough,” he said with a nod.

“I am upset that I played a part in all of this, to some extent.”

“Don’t be embarrassed. The secret of my Sky Knights would’ve been revealed at some time or another. Still, I am not saying that you alone are worth more than all the Knights of the Sky.”

I merely shrugged as I heard such prideful words.

They are, after all, the descendants of the Wyvern Knights who made the mighty elves cower in the lush forests while they roamed the blue sky.

“Would Doris and Jin’s disciplinary measures be withdrawn?”

The King of Dotrin shook his head. He said he intended to change the habits of the prince who always flashed about like an impulsive thunderbolt. The grounds for punishment as laid out by the king sounded quite plausible.

“No, Doris should have contemplated the matter and then decided not to intervene. To say that he aided a trusted friend was always the excuse that sprang into his mind after he did something rash. I know him best, for he is my son.”

Doris was not my child, but I sympathized with the king’s position. From what I’ve seen of Doris, I doubted whether he had considered both sides of the matter. It was highly likely that the only resistance to his plans came from Jin.

“The same counts for Jin Katrin. He is quite an extraordinary man, yet his good sense becomes warped when he is with Doris.”

The king continued to complain about the two for a long time. Even if he was

complaining, I felt how much he loved and trusted them. I chuckled when I saw this softer side of him bared and then changed the subject.

“How goes the war?”

“In some places, we dominate, and in others, we are being pushed back. There is no certainty yet – And no breaches.”

“Where are you being pushed?”

The king widened his eyes when he tried to formulate a casual response to my query. I smiled and asked him again, “Where are your forces retreating? Where am I needed?”

It was time for me to mount a wyvern and repay my debts.

* * *

Instead of answering on the spot, the king said I should attend the war council on the following morning and bring my knights with me. I said I would, but I first had to properly conceal my identity. As things stood, no one would notice a few extra mercenaries.

My intention had been to disguise us as mercenaries from the get-go. That is why I had only brought knights with me who collected mana in the heart. Mana hearts in this era are viewed as poor tools for mercenaries and the untrained.

“You must take great care.”

The King of Dotrin was very concerned. Since he could not extend his full protection to me as a Leonberger, he said there would be many uncomfortable situations I will face moonlighting as a mercenary.

At that, I laughed.

I have never enjoyed much respect as a member of a royal family, and I wasn’t interested in anything like that in the first place. I had never enjoyed it.

I left the dining room, telling the king not to worry.

I moved through the corridors along the path I had taken with the messenger, seeing no one from beginning to end. When I came to my room, I saw that my party had gathered outside it, waiting for me.

“Let’s go in.”

I led them into the room and told them of the conversation I had with the king.

“From tomorrow on, you will all be mercenaries.”

The knights nodded at my words, and none of them seemed reluctant.

It was natural, as I had chosen them in the first place.

Gwain had never truly lived like a knight, and he had even reached rock bottom, living a life of ruin. He would never be reluctant to disguise himself as either a soldier or a mercenary.

The same counted for Gunn, Adelia, and Gwain’s comrades.

I had figured that Bernardo would be a problem, but fortunately, he had a strange fantasy.

“To be a noble who disguises himself as a mercenary. It’s romantic.”

I ignored Eli, who talked with a blushing, eager face, and moved on to the topic of my name. If we were to be mercenaries, we had to talk like them.

“You can call me Ian.”

“Ian!” Bernardo called me as if he had been awaiting the moment.

He had definitely planned this, I decided. He was in a strange mood.

“Ian. Ian! Ian!”

‘Pwak!’ I couldn’t take it anymore, so I struck him across the back of his head.

“Why!? You said we must call you Ian!” he exclaimed, making his excuses.

“Maybe ‘nim’ should be added,” I suggested then.

“Ian-nim! Ieeeaan-Niiim!” Bernardo called me, enjoying himself.

“If you want to live, you better stop that.”

I was getting pissed off for some reason.

Bernardo, seeing my face, stepped back.

Obviously, when I had first met him, he had a rather aristocratic bearing and had been able to evince a moderate level of dignity. But as I saw him now, all such noble terms had become obsolete when talking about Bernardo Eli. It seems that his manners have been flushed away after he had spent so much time with the rough rangers.

As I clucked my tongue, Gwain said, “Ian-nim.”

It sounded dry and awkward, but at least not gritty. It didn’t even sound selfish or mocking, as Bernardo had made it sound. In Gwain’s voice, it just sounded as if it was the way you called someone who you worked with. Gwain’s two comrades also called me this in a similar tone, then shut up. It seemed that they had all practiced it in their own way.

I looked at Gunn. She could not speak, so she formed my name with her mouth.

She then beckoned, (Name – First Time)

I asked what she meant by time, but she gave no answer.

I didn’t think more about it as I turned to Adelia.

She shook her head. Unlike the others, she had been my maid from the start and was even bound to me by the trait of [Subordination], so she could not manage to put my name into her mouth, not even half of it.

Adelia tried it several times, but she couldn’t say my name in the end.

“I think you can just call him the manager, or chief,” said Bernardo.

Adelia's eyes widened.

"If we want to act as mercenaries in the first place, someone has to play the role of leader. Not one of us can do that, so isn't it only right for Ian-nim to take the lead?"

He was right. I thought just looking like mercenaries would be enough, but we had to truly act like them as well.

"I didn't even think so far," I said. Bernardo, who had been talking all over the place, looked at my face and grew quiet.

"Yes, Chief," I heard Adelia softly whispering while I was gazing at Eli. Then, her face turned red, and she didn't know what to do. It seemed that it would take her some time to get used to it.

"But when it comes to being a mercenary company, we should also have the name of a mercenary company," Bernardo, who was extraordinarily sharp today, spoke again, then added, "I will decide now."

Then, as if he had been thinking of this beforehand, he gave his suggestion.

"How about the Bright Sword Mercenaries?"

It was a name that would not even be used by the ancient knights who used Muhunshi poetry four-hundred years ago, and they liked their poetic expressions. I ignored Bernardo neatly and asked the others for their opinions.

Gwain, his comrades, and Adelia looked at me blankly, and theirs were truly faces without thought.

When I met his gaze, Gwain figured that he had to say something, so he quickly blurted out a suggestion.

"What about the Association of Mercenaries?" Gwain said, and then at once shut his mouth, his face troubled. He knew that he had spoken up for nothing.

I sympathized with him; it would have been better had he stayed silent.

I then looked at Gunn, but she didn't seem interested at all.

“I like the Bright Swords,” Bernardo offered his name again, adding, “And if you don’t like the Bright Sword Mercenaries, the Indomitable Mercenaries sound quite intrepid. How about it?”

I was completely ignoring Bernardo at this point, no matter what he said.

Then there was a name that came to my mind.

“Veil.”

Bernardo looked at me and frowned as he heard this.

“From now on, we are the Veil Mercenary Company.”

“All of a sudden? What is this vei-” and Bernardo shut his mouth when he saw my face and realized his mistake. It wasn’t just him: Gwain, Trindall, Kampra, and Adelia all had the same faces.

And I probably looked like that as well.

Veil, the title of my departed uncle, Bale Balahard: The word held a very special meaning for the knights of Leonberg.

* * *

The next day, we met with the king privately before attending the war council.

It was in order for us to sort out the names in advance and get used to them.

“The Veil Mercenaries. That’s a good name.”

The King of Dotrin looked at my party, doing a brisk review of them.

At first glance, it seemed as if the king was embarrassed.

When he saw Bernardo Eli, he nodded as if he was quite good. He tilted his head as if sensing some unknown incongruity when he passed by Gwain, Trindall, and Kampra. They met him with cold gazes. And when he saw Adelia, the king spat out, “She’s amazing! Amazing.”

The king's eyes shone like never before, obviously understanding her potential.

I stepped forward and interspersed myself between the king and Adelia.

"This is my knight," I said firmly, "Don't covet her."

The king sighed. Adelia's potential seemed to have made him quite greedy.

However, he pretended to no longer covet her talent as he spoke on casually.

"When I tell you to come in, enter. I will introduce you formally," he said and then left us as he went off somewhere.

We waited for a while, and then the messenger I had walked with before came and said the king has called for us.

'Cheelkup!' the knights slid down the visors of their iron helms, and now only the tips of their noses and their mouths were visible.

The visored knights drew their hoods over their helms and then glanced at me.

I followed their example, becoming visored and hooded.

Then we followed the messenger until he halted before a large door. When I nodded, he opened it quietly.

Before us, there was a conference room with a convex ceiling which was frescoed to appear like the blue sky, a huge marble table, and dozens of men around it who all looked at us.

From their faces, I figured that they thought only trivial mercenaries had appeared.

We weren't the kind of folk who deserved much attention from the commanders who led the kingdom's forces. Yet, there was a strangeness to their expression, and they were weirdly focusing on us, with not a single one of them speaking up.

In that strange silence, I looked at the king, and the king of Dotrin was laughing. It's as if he was having fun by gazing upon the sight before him.

Next to him stood Doris, who I had not seen since coming here, and there was Jin.

Jin looked at me and touched his lips, which meant: “Introduce yourself.”

It was an unfamiliar experience. Other people have always announced my name on behalf of me, so this was the first time I had to come out first and reveal my name like this.

But it wasn’t a bad thing; I just didn’t want to do the stereotypical introduction.

So, I introduced us in my own way: Like a person walking the path of the sword, like a mercenary. I drew my sword and summoned an aura into it, to prove myself.

“Wow.”

I heard someone sigh behind me. Dotrin’s commanders all had wide eyes as they stood around the table. The king’s face seemed as if it would burst into laughter at any moment, so funny was it for him.

Regardless of their reactions, I exclaimed vigorously, “Here is the Veil Mercenary Company!”

# CHAPTER 137
# MERCENARY OF THE TWIN SWORDS (4)

Dotrin's commanders said nothing. They just looked at me, their eyes wide.

"I am Ian, the leader of the Veil Mercenary Comp-"

'Shhtk,' they all got up from their seats before I even finished talking.

Then, they politely bowed their heads.

"Dotrin's nobles greet the young lion of Leonberg, who has come to our aid without hesitation during troubling times."

"We express our infinite respect and gratitude to His Highness the First Prince of the Leonberger family."

I felt out of shape, lost. It was at that exact moment when the king of Dotrin finally burst into laughter. He laughed so much that it seemed he would soon not be able to breathe. So hard did he laugh that his face turned a bright red.

I considered things quietly as I looked at the gasping, laughing king and his son. The people who decide when the armies should advance or retreat, the minds that conceive of the strategies needed to dominate on the field of battle: They were the commanders gathered here.

Anyone who cared little for the security of Dotrin would not have been in this room in the first place. Even though I could have figured this out with little thought, it was only now that I realized that the situation was natural.

First of all, my mistaken judgment was due to me being anxious to head to the battlefield.

Secondly, I had grown so used to the situation in my home country, where the main players of the empires have scattered their spies all over the place, that I had made the mistaken assumption that the same would count for Dotrin.

As I was locked in thought, I suddenly noticed that I had my sword in my hand.

‘Fwooo-‘

My brilliant display of swordsmanship had been of no use. Today was the first time that my Aura Blade looked shabby, unimpressive.

‘Sssuuu-‘

The Aura Blade faded, and my sword cooled down.

‘Schheek. Jrkf Jrkf.’

I sheathed my sword and headed to an empty seat, sitting down. I acted as natural as possible as if nothing had happened.

“Hmmm.”

Dotrin’s nobles tried hard to avoid looking at me. I was grateful for their consideration.

“Here are the Veil Mercenaries.”

It would all have been well and good if it wasn’t for Doris, who mouthed off as he teased me.

“Ian, the leader of the Veil Mercenary Company.”

I ignored him, and the nobles didn’t respond at all. When no one noticed him, Doris’s face turned quite grim. When the prince no longer japed after being ignored, the stuffy atmosphere in the conference hall noticeably improved.

“Then, please briefly explain the war situation to the head of our Veil Mercenary Company.”

But in the end, the king spoke, and the laughter that the nobles had tried to contain burst from them. I maintained my composure as I waited for the noise to die down.

“Hmgmm,” one knight cleared his throat, arose, and started briefing us on the situation. His tone was serious, with not even a hint of mirth.

“The empire’s forces, who have appeared on our borders at this time, consist of a total of eleven legions and thirty-two knight squadrons. Our collective allied troops number six legions, a total of twelve thousand men. We have twenty knight squadrons.”

I was surprised, for it was a great war: All in all, seventeen legions and fifty-two knight squadrons have been mobilized.

It was a battlefield where more than five thousand knights would be clashing and colliding.

Even though their foe was the empire, the Dotrin Kingdom still had a considerable number of knights. How long has it been since the war began? Surely they hadn’t employed all their knights to the front from the beginning?

In fact, when I studied the map that had been laid out on the table, I saw that the second and third defensive lines have already been drawn. This meant that the front line was not everything.

Dotrin is a small country that I had not known existed until I visited Hwangdo.

I looked around, seeing all the nobles seated around the table. I captured their appearances in my mind, one by one.

All of them were full of spirit, and their eyes shone with determination. Not one of them seemed afraid of the imperial invasion.

I sighed.

The future that I hoped for Leonberg to one day have was right here. Loyal and wise nobles who think only of their country. Courageous knights who would never give in before the mighty empire.

And a king and his family who everyone can trust.

I felt strange as I forced these impressions into myself, and I said to myself: Leonberg will soon be like this. I will make it so.

I promised myself, again and again.

And while I was making such oaths, the meeting continued.

“At present, all fortresses and strongholds on the front are under attack. The three fortresses on the southwestern border are the ones where the battles have not gone in our favor.”

The knight pointed at the map, and his fingertips glided over three fortresses on the frontline.

“How do we turn back the tide?” the King of Dotrin, whose face had become serious, asked the nobles for their opinions.

“The reserve legions and knight squadrons waiting at the rear have already received requests to lend support, and they are marching. But…”

“But?”

“There are only two out of three fortresses that can be saved in time. One of our strongholds is bound to fall.”

The tone of the knight was heavy.

“There are not enough reserve troops deployed to the southwest. If we divide our troops and try to save all three fortresses, we might lose them all.”

“If you were to choose one, which would you choose?” the king asked.

The knight pointed to one of the border fortresses.

“High Seabreeze Fortress.”

“Who’s is their commander?” the king asked the knight.

“He’s Burg Berten.”

“Why is a friend of the kingdom, who should be enjoying his old age on his estate, there?”

“As soon as he heard that war has broken out, he made haste for the front lines,” the knight answered the king, sweating.

“Oh, he has always been so eager. Tsu,” the king clucked his tongue, and then ordered, “Connect us.”

One of the commanders had been waiting for this order. He took out a crystal ball and placed it on the table. It was the same type of magical crystal sphere that I had used several times.

“We are connected,” the knight said.

“Burg,” said the king.

((Is that you, Your Majesty?)) came the voice from the crystal sphere.

“Is the situation bad?”

((…beaten back! The enemy has infiltrated through our waterways! Our number is one hundred, and the enemy troops are constantly increasing!)) came the urgent report, and then the old man fired off instructions to someone that must have been near him. ((Deploy the reserve troops, buy us some time! Rally the archers and wipe them out!))

“What did you just say?” the king asked with a frown.

((It is exactly as I have reported, Your Majesty))

“I will tell you straight up. I cannot afford to send reinforcements right away.”

There was a moment of silence beyond the crystal ball.

((None at all? Or will it take time?))

“I cannot guarantee that they will get there in time.”

Once more, Burg was silent.

“Abandon the fortress,” implored the king, and the old man responded strongly.

((East, west, north, and south, the imperial forces encircle us at all sides. Escape is impossible))

The people gathered in the conference hall groaned.

((We will hold on for as long as we can. It will be good if we are reinforced, and if they don't reach us, it can't be helped)) came the voice of the old commander, who was prepared to fight to the death. The king's face looked terrible, and I could read his heart in his eyes.

Even though there were Knights of the Sky who could fly for the fortress immediately, I felt tormented from the inside at having to hear from afar the crisis that the defenders faced.

There were swords the king could use other than the Sky Knights.

"I will go."

The commanders looked at me at once.

"Even if you go, we can't send a lot of troops at once. You might end up trapped in the citadel," the king said with a hard face, then asked, "Will you go anyway?"

"Mercenaries are used in cases such as these," I answered without hesitation.

((You there! Who are you? This is the first time I hear your voice)) the old man asked from his fortress.

"I am a mercenary commander, newly hired by the royal family."

((Your Majesty means to send mercenaries?)) Burg's voice had been filled with anticipation moments before, yet it now became sorrowful. The fortress was on the verge of being taken, so, at best, he was disappointed that mercenaries were being sent. I could hear it in his voice.

"I wager you won't be disappointed," the king said to the old man.

He added that we would be far more helpful than a few knights.

* * *

When the dilemma regarding High Seabreeze Fortress was solved, the commanders in the conference hall regained their vitality to a noticeable degree.

“We must take this opportunity to prepare for a single, mass advance by deploying the reserve troops. Our current frontline composition cannot flexibly respond to the imperial offensive.”

“If we move our reserve forces in, then all the plans we have made must be revised! Rather, it would be better to mobilize the forces at our rear and fill in the gaps that will be created if we push our reserves in!”

“In this war, we have to play the long game! And to prepare for a drawn-out war, you have to bide your time with the forces on your front! Surely we must wait before deploying any of our reserves!”

Their arguments came and went, and at times the nobles calmly discussed things, while in other moments, they even started pointing at each other. Even the most taciturn knights did not hesitate to express their opinions, and if the suggestions of the king were found to be lax, they even ruthlessly refuted his errors in judgment.

No one thought it strange to correct the king, nor did anyone seem to show any remorse if they did so. Fierce and honest debate can never exist if it is restricted by status.

All gathered here yearned only for victory, and to reach this end, they spoke as if from one heart. Other than winning the war, they seemed to care about little else. Every moment, they lived to gain victory over the empire.

An old memory came to my mind: The Leonberg of ages past had been just like this. As I was immersed in my appreciation, the meeting came to an end.

The situation of the High Seabreeze Fortress was so dire that my knights and I decided that we would ride to the frontlines upon wyverns so that we could reach the fortress two days hence. Once everyone left, the king looked at me.

“Dotrin will never forget your dedication.”

His praise was not needed, for once the kingdom of Leonberg stood against the empire, it would be a great thing indeed if the strong Dotrin stood by our side.

The king reached out, and we shook hands as our gazes met.

The king was looking at me with great favor.

* * *

The situation changed rapidly in a single day. It was reported that a large number of imperial wizards, who had not been revealed up till now, had been deployed to the battlefields and were attacking the fortresses of Dotrin. The frontline fortresses were besieged, and communication with the royal castle blocked off.

“Will you still go?” the king asked me again.

No matter how many times he asked me this, my answer remained the same.

Doris and Jin Katrin came to me and prayed for me. The second prince, Kislan, whom I had met when I first entered the castle, also visited me and expressed his gratitude, wishing me luck.

And another day passed, and it was still a dark morning when I walked through the hallways of the castle, looking at the world outside the windows. It was still covered with thick clouds. After I had walked for a long time, I came upon an empty courtyard, and the Wyvern Knights were there.

The knights were dressed in old-fashioned blue uniforms, and they drew their swords at once.

‘Fwooow! Fwooow!’ A dazzling brilliance gathered at the tips of their swords, driving away the thick mist.

“Let’s hear it for Leonberger’s young lion!” the knights cried aloud.

It was a small departure ceremony, yet I liked it very much. I rolled my shoulders and walked boldly past them.

“Please be safe.”

“We will join you soon.”

Whenever I passed one of them, the knight bowed his head and spoke.

Some prayed that I gain victory and luck, while others thanked our party on behalf of the besieged High Seabreeze. And some pledged that they would soon be following us into battle.

After passing them all, I came to the king.

“I hope that the name of the Veil Mercenaries will spread throughout the continent,” the King of Dotrin said to me with a spiteful smile.

I could neither laugh nor frown as he said this. I just silently shook the king’s hard hand.

“Death to the enemy! Only victory and glory to Dotrin’s allies!”

As I listened to the bold cry of the knights, I mounted my horse and looked back.

The king and knights of Dotrin were all looking at us in the same manner.

I bowed my head and then rode after the rider who would act as our guide.

After leaving the castle, we passed through the gates of the royal capital. Then we rode for a while until we reached the foot of the mountain where the wyverns were hidden.

We left our horses there and mounted the wyvern.

“Hold on tight!” the Sky Knight shouted, and the wyvern roared with vigor as it leaped into the air. The ground quickly became distant, and the huge royal castle was soon seen no more.

When we finally flew up high, the sun rose.

We headed west, with the sun at our backs.

We finally arrived at the foot of a mountain not far from the battlefield. The sun had already risen high, almost setting.

“That’s it for me. I wish you luck.”

The Wyvern Knight, who dropped us off, gave a short greeting and then soared away high into the sky. He made a few turns above our heads and then disappeared eastward.

“We will guide you.”

Some of Dotrin's mountain infantry appeared after a while. They had been waiting nearby and now led our group on. As we walked along with them, a fishy scent came to my nose.

Instinctively, I took a deep breath. The rich, intense scent of blood and iron seeped deep into my lungs.

It was exciting. My heart started beating faster and faster.

It was only now that I truly knew that I was on a battlefield.

'Wedgaa!'

Just then, dozens of fireworks exploded in the sky. I looked up at their red trajectories. The darkness that had come with the night was banished for a moment.

The shadow of the fortress standing tall on the plain was revealed in the distance.

Dozens of fiery traceries fell over that massive shadow.

'Bang!'

Flames spread from place to place, and a great fire soon raged.

And by its light was the scene of the battlefield revealed. The half-breached castle gate. Walls that have collapsed here and there.

"There stands a fortress just before its fall," Bernardo said to me, "It's crazy for us to jump in there now."

I lowered the visor on my helmet, and instead of answering, I drew my swords.

I looked at the two blades in my hands.

At first glance, they looked like cheap long swords, which are common among mercenaries. But in fact, they were Twilight and my true body, and their hilts had been reshaped under the hands of the Prima Meister. He has hidden their peculiarities and lustrous accouterments.

No one would recognize the true nature of these swords by looking at them.

It meant that I had nothing much to worry about, and so I proceeded onto the battlefield without hesitation. I grasped my two swords lightly.

Twilight in my left hand and Dragon Slayer in the right.

# CHAPTER 138
# FISH IN WATER, OR THE UNBRIDLED FOAL (1)

Berg Berten, who now defended a fortress in the southwestern part of Dotrin, had originally been a man who was guaranteed a comfortable old age. His estate was stable, his vassals loyal, and his future promised to be prosperous and peaceful.

It was a life that anyone would envy, yet he soon began to suffer a terrible lethargy.

In his opinion, he was a warrior – An unfortunate warrior born into the wrong age.

He devoted his entire life to the sword, yet he became a veteran without once drawing his blade for war.

It was an empty life.

When he heard that the empire had declared war on Dotrin, he decided to banish the void that ruled his half-life, so he settled his affairs and headed to the field of battle without a moment's hesitation.

As he expected, he recovered his zest for life on the battlefield.

While his wrinkled shell of a body remained, his vitality rose from the inside. It was as if he had regained his lost youth. The war grew worse as time passed, and it came to be that he could not promise the survival of High Seabreeze for another day.

Nevertheless, he never once regretted his decision.

When he heard the king say that there would be no reinforcements, he promised that his bones would be buried in the fortress that he defended.

High Seabreeze would soon collapse, but before that, Berg would build a mountain of imperial corpses. He did not doubt that his end would come without regrets.

It didn't take long for him to realize that such sentiments were a grievous old man's selfish greed.

‘Bang!’

Dozens of spears of fire struck the fort.

“Uuhu…” Berg saw the face of a young soldier who crouched in fear as he covered his ears.

“Aah, it hurts…”

Another soldier had been scorched through exposure to the magical flames, and he shed dry tears – And died.

“Mom… Momma…”

“I don’t want to die. I don’t want to die.”

Soldiers hiding behind the walls as they wept came into his sight, yet Berg Berten walked toward the walls with a firm face. A soldier who was screaming under a pile of rubble saw the old commander and cried out for help.

Berg started to lift a stone block by hand.

“Commander! It’s dangerous, stand back!” a loyal old knight who had followed him from the province cried in warning. Berg cared little and continued to clear away the pile of rubble.

“Be patient,” he told the soldier.

“I will. Thank you, commander,” the soldier, whose lower body was crushed and limp, expressed his gratitude in a weak voice.

‘Bang!’

At that instant, the magic of the imperial wizards bombarded the walls once more.

‘Cladunk!’ the old commander finally lifted up the large block that had lain atop the soldier. But as the magic slammed into the walls, another stone was dislodged and fell full onto the unknown soldier who Berg was trying to rescue.

“Commander!” In the next instant, Berg’s knights rushed to him, pulled him back.

The old commander looked at the fallen soldier's twitching hand. That was all that remained of a man who had been crushed by stone, his shape no longer human.

Berg looked around himself.

"You motherfuckers, stop!" a soldier cried out, swearing, as he cleared away rubble to save his fallen comrades. Some soldiers stared at the wreckage and ruin blankly, their faces desolate, and these men caught Berg saw as well.

Atop the wall, scared and trembling soldiers were dying – Defenseless and exposed to the enemy's magic.

"What about our wizard?" Berg demanded.

"He is giving his all to hold the fort's gate."

The old commander closed his eyes tightly. Where did it all go wrong?

Was it truly such a vain desire, to want to die while fighting the enemies of Dotrin as a knight?

When the imperial forces had encircled High Seabreeze, would it have been better to retreat, even if facing heavy losses by doing so? Countless thoughts passed through Berg's head, yet he could not think for long.

Screams and wails were resounding from all quarters. Beyond the wall, the sound of marching drums was heard. When this terrible baptism of magic was over, the imperial troops would soon arrive. And as the damage mounted after repeated assaults, those imperial dogs would climb up the walls and bite into the throats of the exhausted Dotrin soldiers.

The commander opened his eyes, drew his sword, and headed for the wall. As he climbed to the ramparts, the situation was revealed with greater clarity.

The fortress had been crushed by repeated magical bombardments. Hails of arrows constantly poured down from the sky. The archers of Dotrin couldn't even raise their heads, let alone counterfire.

The fatigue, despair, and impending doom that filled the soldiers' faces sent shivers down Berg's spine. Even if they got lucky and endured for one more day, they would

not be able to alter the fate of the fortress. For the first time, the word ‘end’ came into Berg’s mind.

He shook his head violently and looked into the distance.

‘Dumtumdum Dumtumdum Dumtumdum~’

The sound of drums came from everywhere, and dark shadows endlessly rushed toward the burning fortress. Burg took a bow from an archer who crouched beneath the wall.

He drew the string back and let go as he loosed the arrow.

‘Pluugk!’ one of the imperial soldiers fell.

Draw, release.

Another one met his end.

An arrow rushed at Berg and struck his armor. He did not back down.

He would reduce the number of approaching imperial troops one by one, so he constantly drew and released, drew and released.

Inspired by their commander’s efforts, archers arose from all over.

“Aaouch!”

And in the next moments, many of them fell under the volleys of arrows loosed by the enemy.

Still, more archers managed to fire arrows than die under those of the enemy.

‘Ssasasak!’

This was the first time the archers could fire since the magic bombardments had started.

However, even though all the archers on the wall fired in unison, they could not slow down the enemy’s assault. The imperial archers had been firing all the while, but at

some point, the rain of arrows stopped as the imperial troops neared the walls.

The archers of the fortress, who had been awaiting this moment, stood up and poured out volley after volley.

However, the time given to them was not much.

Ladders were set against the walls, and hooks were thrown. And then, the imperial army began scaling the walls. The infantrymen grabbed their axes and cut into the ropes of the hooks.

Knights expelled mana as they pushed away ladders.

However, despite these efforts, they could not prevent the imperial army from gaining the walls.

The archers set down their bows and grabbed their spears and swords. They stabbed and slashed desperately at the enemies who had ascended.

'Chik! Chin! Klang!'

However, the enemies who had gained the walls so easily deflected the spears and parried the swords. In an instant, heads were severed, and throats were slashed.

"It is the enemy knights!" someone shouted a moment later.

The clashing of swords could be heard all over. The knights of the citadel rushed to drive off the empire's knights. However, as their stamina and mana were already depleted, the Knights of Dotrin could not push the enemy back. All they could do was hold their ground.

The number of enemy knights on the wall was increasing.

The knights of the fortress were surrounded by two or more enemies and struggled desperately. They couldn't even dream of aiding the soldiers in driving the foe away. They were locked in a struggle to survive. The same counted for the commander.

Berg Berten was already surrounded by imperial knights. The old knights who had come here with him from the province fought hard to protect him, yet they were suffering a heavy toll.

A forty-year-old man, a friend of Berg and his loyal knight fell onto his back, dead. A knight who had entered Berg's service only recently, and always complained that he had not tasted battle for decades, was pierced by a sword through his chest and fell from the wall.

"Sir, fall back," a bloody knight implored Berg to retreat.

"Where will I go if I fall back!?"

The old commander instead fixed his sword and bellowed a war cry.

Although the outcome was different from what he had hoped for, Berg was about to meet his end while fighting on the wall, as he had originally imagined himself doing.

The commander took off his helmet, threw it aside, and grasped his sword with both hands.

He slashed out vertically and then horizontally into the knights who had gained the wall.

Berg had honed his swordsmanship from his youngest age. Although he could never become a quad-chain knight due to a lack of foes and also inherent talent, the commander had never been weak.

His mastery of the blade has reached maturity, and he sliced into the necks of the imperial knights in quick succession.

"Drive the enemy off the walls!"

The knights were inspired by their commander's struggles, and so they pushed back at the enemy knights with greater effort. The soldiers, who were prepared to die, stuck to the knights and aided them in battle.

The stubborn resistance of the imperial knights began to falter as they fell one after the other.

"Hfoo, Hfoo," Berg caught his breath as he studied the situation on the walls.

There were not many enemies left upon the ramparts. He had believed that the fort would fall right away, but it seemed they had succeeded in stopping the imperial

offensive.

His judgment was premature.

‘Baangg!’

The walls shook with a roar, and screams were heard.

“The gate is open!”

The old commander ordered that someone go find the wizard, and the answer came back that the wizard, who had endured and endured, had finally fainted due to mana reflux.

“Half remain on the wall, and the other half comes to block off the gate with me!”

Berg marshaled the knights and rushed toward the fortress gate.

Within a short span of time, half of the soldiers guarding the gate were slain. They were elite heavy infantry, with better armaments, training, and morale than the other soldiers.

They were being cut down as if they were naught but conscripts. It was natural. No matter how good the heavy infantrymen were, they were no match for the knights.

Even worse, there was a knight with an Aura Blade among the imperial knights, and his presence was too much for the defensive formation to bear. It soon collapsed.

The Imperial Paladin was distinguishable by his ornate armor, and he was slaughtering the heavy infantry.

“Imperial cur!”

The paladin had cut down two infantrymen in a single strike, yet he now turned his head as he heard Berg’s angry exclamations.

Eyes flashed from inside his helmet, and the paladin began cutting a path for himself through the heavy infantry as he approached the old commander.

“Commander! Save yourself!” the knights shouted as they interspersed themselves

between Berg and the paladin.

“If I fall back, where do I go?”

Berg glared at the Imperial Paladin, and then fixed his sword before him as he tightened his grip upon the hilt. He ordered the remaining troops of Dotrin to escape the fort and somehow break through the siege lines.

The knights refused, yet their commander was determined and insistent. Eventually, the knights relented and scattered in all directions, running toward any gap in the lines they could find.

The only ones who remained were those old knights who had followed Berg from the province.

“Why aren’t you going?”

“I’ve lived long enough, so where would I go?”

“If we can give the younger ones enough time to flee, then it would be enough.”

The old knights replied in embarrassed tones to their commander’s question, yet their voices were more exhilarated than fear-filled.

Berg gave up on trying to persuade them, realizing that his old guardians had already made peace with death.

“I don’t know about anyone else, but I have to stop that paladin.”

“I don’t know if that’s possible with your old body, but we can try.”

“You don’t know, maybe that paladin is as old as us!”

By exchanging such jokes that fit well into their predicament, the old knights prepared their hearts and minds for the coming fight.

The paladin strode forward. The archers upon the walls fired down at him at once, yet no arrow could so much as scratch his body.

The paladin walked on without hesitation until he came near the old commander.

“No sense in waiting then.”

Dozens of old knights charged him from every direction. These veterans of the sword all poured in at once. However, their opponent was a knight who had transcended to a level far beyond veterancy.

The old knights fell helplessly under his blade.

Ten, eight, seven, five, four – In an instant, six knights became cold corpses as they fell to the ground. The remaining three exchanged glances as they circled the paladin.

However, the paladin stared only at Berg Berten, as if he cared nothing for the others.

“…” said the paladin, his low voice coming from his helmet.

“Hey! You guy! if you come to Dotrin, you must speak in Dotrin!” an old knight scolded the paladin.

The paladin continued to speak as if he had heard nothing.

Berg was able to grasp a few words due to the limited knowledge he had gained of True Imperial when he was in his youth. The paladin was encouraging surrender.

“There is no reason to live to this age and be cursed,” the old commander replied in broken imperial language. He didn’t know whether he had spoken properly.

However, when Berg saw the paladin summon his Aura Blade once more, he decided that his words had been understood: He was determined to die with his blade in hand.

The paladin raised his sword. The old knights lowered their postures as they prepared to move in.

‘Chin,’ the paladin moved, and the commander ignored his men and readied his sword as he watched the paladin fly straight at him.

The paladin swung his sword, a sword with decades worth of accumulated mana, and his strike was blocked, yet it still cleaved Burg’s blade in two.

The paladin was amazed, and instead of being slashed by a broken sword, a gauntleted fist punched into his nose.

“No way!” he bellowed. Berg was not one to miss a chance like this, so he roared fiercely and pulled a dagger from his waist and slashed out.

And at that moment- ‘Tluk!’ Surprisingly, the paladin’s hand was severed. Even the old commander, wielding his dagger, was amazed, dumbfounded.

“Kaahk!” the paladin bellowed as he clutched the stump of his wrist while blood spurted from it, and he retreated from the old man. Berg stared at the paladin and then glanced at the dagger he gripped.

There wasn’t a single drop of blood on the dagger, and yet, the paladin’s wrist was bleeding profusely.

Berg Berten soon knew how this could be. A sword had pierced itself into the blood-spattered ground, and blood flowed down its blade.

“Are you in charge of this fortress?”

Someone’s voice came from one side, and the commander turned his head.

An unknown man was walking toward Berg through the gate. There was a bloodied swordsman at his side, and they walked on as if taking a leisurely stroll.

The man’s helmet covered all except his lower face, and he wore leather armor of good quality. In his hand was a rough-looking sword.

As the old commander met those eyes that gleamed within the helmet, he instinctively nodded.

“You came to the right place,” said Berg.

A white-toothed smile appeared below the helm.

The man walked up to Berg and took the blade that had pierced into the ground. He shook the blood from it in a single motion, and as he held a sword in each hand, he asked, “Looks like you were preparing a retreat. Can you break through the siege?”

“I can’t guarantee that my men will break through, but there is nothing I can do about that.”

“Then cancel the retreat,” said the man.

The old commander frowned.

Whether he had noticed it or not, the unknown man spoke on.

“Because this fortress will not fall today.”

He spoke with a strangely convincing voice, and when Berg heard those words, it truly seemed as if the fortress would hold. It was an unfamiliar experience for him.

The old commander forgot about the dire situation, as he had become curious as to the identity of the man.

“Who the hell are you?”

After Berg had asked this, the man suddenly cleared his throat, and out of nowhere, he raised his swords into the air and shouted, “The Veil Mercenaries are here!”

They told Berg that they are they reinforcements from the royal city.

# CHAPTER 139
# FISH IN WATER, OR THE UNBRIDLED FOAL (2)

The king had said that he would definitely send reinforcements. He also added that they would be a mercenary company but that they would be of more help than one or two knights. However, Berg Berten, commander-in-chief of High Seabreeze Fortress, had long since ceased expecting reinforcements. On the first hand, he judged they would not reach the fortress with ease, and on the second, he knew they would not easily reach the fortress due to the imperial encirclement.

However, the reinforcements that Berg had never expected arrived before his very own eyes.

And it was a single mercenary. Not an army. The commander sighed.

I'd rather just go back. For what did I come to this place for?

Berg was happy that the man came just before the fortress fell, grateful that he rushed here, but the situation was still abysmal and would not change just because a single Sword Master has joined in the defense.

So Berg said to the man, "Help my men to retreat."

It was all right if the elderly died in this place, so Berg asked that the man save even a single one of Dotrin's allied troops.

"You can't do anything as one man, so save yourself."

Berg went on to say that, as the mercenary was so skilled, he would be of more use on the other fronts against the empire.

The man did not listen this time either.

If these were different times and a different place, Berg would have praised him for his determination, but right now, the old commander was only irked by such noble sentiments.

In the next instant, the paladin who had stepped back with his severed wrist fixed his sword and advanced. The mercenary readied his blades and faced the paladin.

The commander shouted, “If you’re going to fight him, aim for his throat from the start!”

The man replied with regret instead of anger.

“I severed his hand with a purpose.”

“What?”

“I purposely kept him alive.”

The conversation did not continue, as the enraged paladin rushed at the man, who met his strikes with twin swords. Dozens of blows came and went in an instant.

At first glance, it was an even bout, but no one believed it would last long.

Even if they were both Sword Masters, a mercenary could never be on the level of a knight, as the former gathered his mana in a heart and would never best a master of the rings.

It was common sense.

However, common sense collapsed before Berg’s very eyes.

As time passed, the mercenary, who all thought would soon be destroyed, was attacking with vigor while the paladin’s sword began to slow, falter.

Several strikes came and went as one blade clashed with two.

The paladin was now fully on the defensive and could focus only on blocking his foe’s strikes.

Increasing his energy, the man swung his twin swords with greater ferocity.

‘Qluap!’ finally, the mercenary pierced the paladin’s thigh deeply with one of his swords.

The paladin tried to beat his foe back with his sword, but the man pierced down with consummate ease, plunging his other sword into the paladin's other thigh.

"Noo!" the paladin collapsed with a scream, no longer able to bear the pain of two swords piercing his legs. The mercenary took the kneeling paladin's sword into his hand and kicked into the knight's chest.

The paladin fell back, and Berg's eyes were wide.

He could not believe it, even if he had seen it with his own eyes. The mercenary has defeated a quad-chain knight.

The man pushed his foot down on the paladin and looked back.

As the commander met his gaze, he swallowed his dry saliva.

It turned out that the man had unusual energies about him. The eyes blazing from behind the helmet were mana-filled, and the energy flowing from the man was grand, so grand.

There wasn't that secular attitude common to mercenaries about the man.

He rather seemed like a knight who had suffered and suffered to reach a state of completion.

If the commander had believed him to be an ordinary mercenary rushing here just before the fortress fell… What kind of sellsword who do such a thing?

Such a spirited man can not be an ordinary mercenary, and Berg believed this with certainty.

"This," at least Berg believed it until the man spoke, "how much is it worth to you?"

The voice cam tumbling into Berg's minds, and his eyes widened, for he did not understand the question.

The man laughed at the old commander.

"Even if you can't believe I bested a paladin, there is no way that I won't accept payment for doing it."

Berg Berten frowned. There were no signs left of the knightly aspect he had seen in the man moments ago. It sounded as if the man was haggling over the prices of goods at the market. All Berg now saw was a mercenary bargaining for the price of besting a paladin.

Even the energy that had been raised by the man's great spirit and swordsmanship was completely gone. The commander, his face trembling, promised the man enormous rewards.

The man's grin grew broader.

"Then there's one more thing," the man said as he tapped the ground with his sword, "How much is this worth?"

Berg looked at the tip of the sword and saw nothing but dirt and blood upon the earth.

He looked at the man with a frown and then spoke as a thought suddenly entered his head.

"Surely…"

"This citadel is certainly not cheaper than a paladin's life," the man said as he grabbed onto the neck of the paladin sprawled onto the floor. "Please consider that carefully."

After he had said this, the man walked toward the gate, dragging the paladin behind him like a crippled dog.

The imperial troops who had broken through Dotrin's heavy infantry and poured through the fort's gate parted before the man to both sides in terror. The imperial forces that stood behind them reacted the same to the man's presence.

And so, the man walked into the forces of the empire, who divided themselves out of fear.

The man came to a halt once he stood under the fort's gate, having entered the portal that connected the inner walls to the outside world.

The sword he had taken from the paladin was squarely aimed at the knight's chest.

Then, he gave a fierce growl as he faced the Imperial Army.

* * *

“Everyone halt where you are!”

The imperial soldiers stopped as they heard my words. Still, a few advanced for some time, pushed forward by the troops at their rear who did not understand what peril the front ranks were facing.

“Halt! Halt!”

“All must halt!”

These soldiers stood still after hearing their commanders bellow throat-bursting orders.

“Huuh…” a soldier that stood right in front of me was terrified, and his shoulders trembled.

I gave a glance at his pathetic display and then looked around.

The pale-faced soldiers of the empire were staring at me, the distance between them and me being a spear’s length.

I felt some of them moving toward me while the others were so perplexed. I shifted the sword to the paladin’s throat without a backward glance.

“No!” screamed the paladin, who had a blade upon his jugular. I then pressed my sword to the paladin’s chest and shouted, “Who is this with a severed wrist?”

I could hear those who had secretly been approaching behind my back retreating with moans.

I asked once more, “And if this man’s throat is cut now, whose fault will it be?”

No one answered me, but they understood me well enough.

I was threatening the paladin’s life.

“If anyone moves so much as a foot, I’ll cut your paladin’s throat. And if I slice into his neck, It’ll be because of the guy who moves first.

It was a sleazy masterpiece of a tactic that would not have worked at another time or place.

But now it was working great. I glanced at the paladin’s groaning face where he knelt at my feet. I saw Burgundy’s crest on his chest: The five-headed dragon.

Even the paladins of the more ordinary noble families are treated with the greatest dignity.

The imperial army remained unmoving.

It was funny: I’m just one man, yet here I was, defending one of Dotrin’s strongholds.

No one dared come forward. Not a single soldier or commander would risk their position by being responsible for a paladin’s death.

I glanced back.

The old commander was watching my confrontation with the imperials with a stern face. I motioned with my head, and the commander understood, ordering his remaining troops to assemble before the gate. All those knights and soldiers of the empire who had so courageously rushed at the citadel now staggered back, some of them pulling out.

When I saw those that still stood in the middle of the gate, my expression grew hard. Their expressions as they looked forward and backward were embarrassing. One of the knights stuck in the corridor checked if his comrades have made a decision and then carefully passed me by.

Others quickly followed this knight as they passed out of the fort past my side. A few sneaky knights among them would’ve attacked me, gathering mana in their sword, had I not pushed the sword against the paladin’s chest with greater strength.

“Oach!” the paladin screamed, saying that he was going to die, and that served as warning enough.

The old commander approached me and gave the report that all the imperial forces

who had invaded the fort had escaped. “Huh.” I could clearly see that he was stunned by my ridiculous hostage play, and he spat to the ground. Then he asked what my other plans were.

“I haven’t thought about any up till now.”

The commander had an absurd expression as he heard my words.

“Let’s shore up the gates first,” said I.

“It will take time. I don’t think they’ll hang back until then,” he said.

He went on to say that the imperial army would not hesitate to attack forever just because of the paladin’s life. They will say that the paladin’s death is a sacred sacrifice, the martyrdom of a noble warrior, and soon the drums of war shall resound once more.

In fact, there were already signs that this would happen.

A messenger had come with some swiftness to the front lines, and those there now looked at the messenger and the paladin alternately with stiff faces. Apparently, the order for advance had been given. We didn’t have much time.

“Let’s beat them with magic,” I suggested in a low voice to the old commander.

“Do you understand that we don’t have that type of magic around here? We have no such thing as magic to repair the ga-“

“It’s simple. If you damage a large portion of the gatehouse and collapse it into the gap, we will be able to buy some time.”

The commander looked at me with a stern face. Then I nodded when I saw him become determined, yet there was still one problem.

“The wizard is spent.”

The wizard, who we needed to break the gatehouse, was all out of mana.

I sighed. Somehow, things could never be easily solved.

“Do what you have to do, and make sure you get it done as soon as possible.”

“What are you going to do?” the old man asked me.

“Whatever the hell I must to buy us some time.”

The commander-in-chief stood by my side with a tragic expression, and I chided him for worrying so. Although he still trembled, he stepped away and began deploying the troops behind us in preparation for the defense, determined to trust me to some extent.

Meanwhile, the tension in the front line was rising.

I could see that the bearings of the imperial commanders, which had once been hesitant, were now poison-filled and battle-ready. Knights stood in tight lines, almost biting at the bit.

And finally, they could ignore orders no more. They were willing to be the ones responsible for the paladin’s death.

‘Dumdum Dumdum Dumdum~’

The tattoo of the drums signaling the advance broke out. The imperial army had retreated, yet in now came at us again. It was the knights of the empire on the front line, taking the place of the terrified soldiers.

“Time to kill this guy then,” I said and struck down with my sword, ‘Skleep!’

The paladin groaned briefly as the unfamiliar feeling of a mortal wound came to him. Then his head drooped, and he moved no more. The energy of the knights charging at us soared; it seemed that the death of my hostage had angered them.

“You will not die a fine death!” an imperial knight shouted. I threw the sword that I held aside and drew my swords from the paladin’s thighs. As I watched the charging knights, I controlled my breathing.

In my mind, I thought of a Muhunshi poem. The poems of the Leonbergers could not be recited here, for I would be exposed. Luckily, poems weren’t written in Leonberg Alone.

I had just the right verse for me, as a mercenary in a foreign war.

“A soldier, he dies, and becomes six silver coins”

“A knight, he dies, and becomes thirty coins of gold”

Although the mercenary had received the title of king, he was never respected by anyone. He wandered around the world without the will to live and with a singular purpose. It was the song of a knight who was mocked when he reached a high place and mocked when he died.

“Victory is a glorious honor”

“And only in my death-filled hall”

“Will there ever be truth”

It was the [Golden Poem] of the mercenary king, or the knight of the gold coins.

I quietly recited this poem of a long-dead man of wealth.

# CHAPTER 140
# FISH IN WATER, OR THE UNBRIDLED FOAL (3)

Opinions were sharply divided over the mercenary king. Some said he was the best knight of his time, while others criticized him for acting like a lazy bum.

It was all right, for he never fought without being given a reward. Once he was paid, he did only enough for the amount that he received, no more and no less. At times he entered the battlefield and fought in a lowly manner, while at other times, he struck the battlefield in an extraordinary fashion. At times, the word 'hero' truly did describe him.

Yet others say he was overly calculating and profit-driven, yet this was no so: Instead of being calculating, he always did his best. The true reason for his strength in each battle being so different was the peculiar nature of his poem.

Embarrassingly, the [Golden Poem] differs in power depending on the amount of promised remuneration. So what about me, now?

I glanced at my enemies: Dozens of heads worth thirty gold coins; thousands of heads worth six silver coins. I guessed the price of the fortress, knowing that there was no reason to give myself a headache by doing a total calculation.

'Hwwaaaak!'

Great energy surged from my heart and instantly spread through my body. My limbs were filled with vitality, and not a even a handful of energy leaked from me to be wasted.

I continued to enjoy the feeling of vitality and knew that I had reached the highest possible level with the [Golden Poem], which was a power corresponding to the [Heroic] level.

'Suuu,' the Aura Blade faded, and Dragon Slayer, which had cried constantly, stopped doing so. I faced the oncoming imperial army with my swords hanging slack.

“He is already exhausted!”

The morale and momentum of the knights rose as they mistook my lack of energy as exhaustion after my battle with the paladin. It was just a feature of the poem, a poem which pursued efficiency to such a degree that it suppressed the release of all energy.

“Haab!” a knight roared as he lifted his sword overhead. I blocked his strike with my left-hand sword and simultaneously slashed out from left to right with my right-hand sword.

The knight’s chest opened in a welter of gore, and he passed out as blood spurted from the wound. More enemies appeared behind him.

My swords flew in to meet them as I blocked attacks with one sword and slashed out at them with the other.

My next opponent came into my eyes: Block and stab, dodge and sever.

The knights faltered, and in the meantime, the imperial officers forced their soldiers into an advance. Spears and blades started to strike at me, and I repeated the same maneuvers again. I batted away the spears and struck out with my swords, and always sliced into my foes before their blades could touch me.

Soldiers kept pushing in.

They tried to kill me, regardless of whether it was because they wanted to get the job done, were being forced to push on by their officers, or had murder in hearts.

Their bodies started to pile up. Every time I stepped forward and pulled my swords back for strikes, I could hear the sounds of dying soldiers.

How many now? Fifty? A Hundred? Or more?

I did not know how many times I have swung my swords and how many foes I had killed.

And I wasn’t interested in knowing.

The only thing that mattered to me was that I was still full of energy. My eyes flashed

as I looked for my next foe. The soldier I locked eyes with screamed in a bizarre fashion as he slumped to the ground. Beyond his line, I saw crossbowmen lined up in two rows, dozens of them. Their bolts were made to pierce through the heavy armor and flesh of knights, and they were all aimed at me.

I stepped out, grabbing onto the stomach of the collapsed soldier as I raised him up before me, tight against my body. In the next moment, dozens of bolts were released and flew at us.

'Papapak!'

The soldier convulsed as the bolts slammed into his flesh, a few even passing through him and at me, yet not one of them could leave a scratch. It was a facet of the [Golden Poem]. The reciter of the poem could avoid certain forms of damage.

"Hurgh!" the soldier vomited blood, looked at me blankly, and collapsed, dead.

The rain of bolts had stopped, so I threw the body aside and studied the crossbowmen. When they met my gaze, their faces turned pale as they struggled to reload. I stared at them and then threw one of my swords.

'Blililikschlak!'

'Kwook!'

The officer of the crossbowmen was pierced through the chest by my flying blade. I could hear the infantry commander shouting out threats as the infantry stumbled on and advanced at me. The knights had stepped back, awaiting their chance once I got tired.

I started laughing: That so many soldiers were now blocked by me alone, unable to withdraw – It was funny. I fixed my sword and advanced. Normally I would have held back, but not now. By killing the commanders, one man can do a lot, and for every knight, I killed here, another of Dotrin's knights may yet still live.

It's easy: I just had to make sure that I sliced through the throat of the enemy who was sticking out his neck to kill me. I raised my sword and quietly recited the chorus of the poem under my breath.

"Coins of gold stained in blood for me a fair price be, that is my strength."

At that moment, my blade took on a yellow energy, flashing as if it was made of pure gold.

Yet my sword was not as soft as gold, for everything that was touched by its edge was severed.

The Imperial Army's battle lines collapsed.

"Uh?" the soldiers made stupid sounds as they fled from me in a haphazard fashion while their lines collapsed. Even those pathetic fleeing men were cut down.

'Fwaaald!'

I vaulted from the ground and dove into the center of the collapsed ranks. From there on out, I swung my blade in random directions. I slashed it from left to right, jumping like crazy all the while.

Suddenly, something came into my mind.

I only then realized that I had gone out too far from gates, so wildly was I running amok.

I slashed a few more vigorous slashes, then shook the blood from my blade, retrieved my other sword, and walked back toward the city gate.

No one stopped me; the imperials simply looked at me from a distance.

Then, once I stopped before the gate, I heard someone say, "A monster, a monster."

Terror spread through the imperial forces.

I raised my energy so that their fear could grow all the greater, so that the entire Imperial Army would come to know true terror.

I proved to them I was not tired, that I still had great energy and all my health.

The soldiers exposed to my energy directly fell to the ground, dropping spears and swords.

The surviving knights furiously rotated their rings and resisted, yet the energies they

summoned were just enough to protect their bodies.

The morale of the Imperial Army plummeted. I could see the flags of the enemy being lowered in all directions. I am only one, and yet so many people were terrified by me.

I wagered that the empire would not be able to show the same might as I was showing now, even if they had a row of quad-chain knights here.

The mana of the knights of this era was only accumulated in the body, and so would be insufficient to change the tide of war. They could surely change the mortal realm to their tastes but did not have enough power to go beyond that.

It was probably so, for the Sword Masters of today have lost all their glorious power-modifiers of old. But even if such things were things of the past, I would recreate the ancient glory here and now.

So I declared, “Tell your generals,” and through my voice, I channeled the glorious achievements of the past Sword Masters, “if they wish to best me, they will have to lose one legion.”

I was showing off my prestige as a one-man legion.

The energy around me shook, and it changed.

It was like a weapon that could be felt by thousands of soldiers, and my declaration resonated all over the battlefield. It was at that moment that the horn signaling the retreat was sounded.

The imperial troops looked at me with crushed faces and then turned around, retreating from the battlefield.

I silently stared at their backs.

‘Pawoooo Pawoooooo Pawoooo!’

The horn of retreat was still ringing urgently.

“It looks like a success.”

* * *

The imperial forces had been frightened into a retreat and only then did Bernardo, Gwain, and Gunn appear. Their attire was scorched and scratched, and their faces showed their exhaustion. Still, their expressions did not look grim.

Bernardo held out two bags when he saw me.

“One was caught off guard and easily killed, and we somehow managed to kill the second one. After that, we couldn’t risk going after anymore.”

As Bernardo reported their progress, his voice sounded slightly amazed. My orders had been well executed, yet I did not praise Bernardo. Even if it was no small feat, I made it a point to rarely praise him.

Then the old commander appeared, and he looked at me for a long time. He opened and closed his mouth several times, for even if he had something to say, he could not easily form the words. Then after a long time, he spoke up, his expression complex.

“You said you were going to buy us some time, and you managed to get rid of the enemy after all.

His voice went beyond wonderment and even disbelief.

I gave a bloody smile as I held out one of the sacks after taking it from Bernardo.

“This is the head of an imperial wizard.”

The expression of the commander changed from instant to instant after he had verified the contents of the sack.

“How much will you be paying us for this?” I asked as I watched his complex emotions.

He gave me an absurd look, yet only for a moment, as he soon laughed and said he would give us whatever we wanted.

“Then, you would go bankrupt.”

I had a lot of family members.

* * *

The discussion on the defense and further troop deployment was a short one. The situation was so bad that it was almost not worth it to discuss such issues.

“The state of our troops is grave. If we count every single person that can fight, they are still less than three-hundred. I am adding additional troops drawn up from the civilians in the fortress, but I don’t expect they’ll do much for us.”

The commander groaned as he heard his officer’s report. It was a victory, but it was a victory that came with only wounds.

I knew that if the enemy returned, we would have little choice. It was impossible to keep a fortress with three-hundred exhausted soldiers and a few civilians. In the last battle, the enemy forces had attacked the gates so that they could gain easy entry, not counting on my presence. There was no guarantee that they would do so again.

They would, predictably, attack all the walls at once, I was very sure of this. And if I had to run all over the wall, it would eventually be breached somewhere, and the soldiers of the fort would be slaughtered by the imperials.

I had driven the imperial forces away for a while, but I knew this delay would be short.

The commander had immediately gathered the leaders and convened a meeting to formulate countermeasures. I attended the meeting in my capacity as head of the reinforcements.

The commanders of the citadel gave various opinions.

Some of them suggested retreat, and everyone agreed that it was the only option. The problem was when and how. All the soldiers were exhausted after the night-long assault, and they needed a break. If they escape now, it would be a futile effort, for they would not be able to run far. Even if the situation was urgent, they could not be pulled out at this time.

“From my experience up till now, the overall commander of the imperial forces is a prudent person. We suffered a lot of damage these past few days, so he will launch an all-out offensive, redraw the siege lines, and employ the remaining imperial wizards to attack the fort.

“In the meantime, we must take care of the wounded and the civilians and find a way to get out here safely.”

The commander and his officers still thought they had time. My thoughts on the matter were the exact opposite.

“The Imperial Army will launch its next offensive tomorrow.”

I suddenly stepped into the debate, and everyone looked at me and frowned. But I had shown them what I was in the recent battle, so not one of them spoke up to oppose me.

It was somewhat regrettable; after all, I was the mercenary rambling ‘Blah blah blah blah, I’ll show you the escape I’ve prepared.’

“Why do you think so?” the commander asked.

“Because they have a reason to hurry,” I replied.

“What is their reason?” came his next question.

“There is some idiot who is coming here, and he will remain after the battle has been won.”

Just before I attended the meeting, Gunn had gestured to me.

She had seen the knights of the imperial family in the enemy camp, and only then did I recall who the paladin was that had died by hand.

“The Third Imperial Princeps is coming here.”

He had been the third princeps’ paladin.

“If I was the imperial commander, I would make sure the battle is won before the third princeps arrives.”

We had a chance: An idiot who could destroy the empire would surely give us the chance of overturning this battle. And I guessed that there was no way the imperial commander knew what I knew.

I knew that the imperial commander had one more reason to capture the fort as soon as possible: It was because of his orders today that the paladin of the princeps died. So, to save his life, the imperial commander had to capture the fort to at least offset the loss of a paladin.

Of course, that was what the enemy commander hoped for.

I made a formal recommendation to the commander-in-chief.

“Even if we will abandon the fortress and retreat, let’s hold on at least until the third princeps comes.”

The old commander asked what will be different if we hold on until then.

“I bet a whole lot will change if we manage to hold out until that time.”

And I added, “Once the third princeps arrives, the tight encirclement might flare wide open.”

# CHAPTER 141
# FISH IN WATER, OR THE UNBRIDLED FOAL (4)

The commanders of the citadel were fiercely opposed to my plan.

They believed they would not last long in their current state, so it was paramount to get all the forces out at the first possible opportunity.

“So, when will that opportunity come?”

The commanders stayed silent, and I groaned. However, they soon spoke up again, talking about how difficult the defense of the fort would be and pointing out how uncertain my ploy was.

From their point of view, theirs was a reasonable refutation. For men like these, who have never met the first princeps in person, my plan sounded nothing more than a gamble for which they had to risk their lives in uncertainty.

I didn’t mean to persuade them.

“Do whatever you want,” I replied and then remained silent. I folded my arms and leaned back on my chair. Those who watched me frowned, it seemed as if they found my attitude to be too irresponsible.

I snorted. In the first place, I was just a stranger. It was not I who was to determine the fate of the fort; it was them. And I was willing to follow whatever decision they made.

It was enough for me to just have a field of battle upon which I faced the empire’s armies.

It didn’t matter to me if it was the battlefield we would enter if we were to attempt an unlikely escape. Anything would do.

Perhaps they realized this about me after a while, as the commanders of the fort soon ignored me, beginning to exchange opinions among themselves.

However, there were no tricks in the bag which could overcome their difficult position.

In such a frustrating situation where no solution was found, the atmosphere in the conference hall soon heated up with no definite outcome.

Eventually, some held the groundless optimism that the imperial army would not harm the civilians, with some even offering the irresponsible suggestion that the soldiers should march at once and flee.

“Stop! Is this what Dotrin’s knights have come to say now?” the old commander yelled. “Look at their history: You know how the imperial forces treat the inhabitants of occupied territory. I never intended to leave a single civilian in the fort. Find a way where we can all leave together.”

The commanders were silenced by the commander-in-chief’s words.

Silence reigned in the conference hall.

“You are Ian, the commander of the Veil Mercenaries, yes?” asked the commander-in-chief as he broke the silence.

“Yes, I am Ian, leader of the Veil Mercenary Company.”

“Okay, Commander Ian. Say you’re right: Let’s say that when the third princeps arrives on the battlefield, there will be a way for us to survive.”

The commander-in-chief gave me a heavy look.

“Is there any way for us to hold out until then?”

“They will be on the offensive again, taking a day off to recover from the damage inflicted to them in battle,” I replied as if having waited for his question.

“Probably.”

“Then, we must prevent them from recovering.”

“Please tell me your plans in detail,” said the commander-in-chief, and I shrugged.

“I have no details to relate,” came my instant reply, and I added, “If we can damage them before they recover, their assault will halt.”

The old commander now had wide eyes.

“Surely…”

“I will infiltrate the enemy camp and make a mess.”

Once they woke up, the last thing on their minds would be taking the citadel.

* * *

The meeting was over. Just when I was about to get up, the old commander asked me, “But how did you enter the fort in this situation?”

“I just walked in,” came my profound reply.

The commander-in-chief laughed, for he could not believe what I was saying.

“I just got mixed in with the foe and advanced with them, and when I saw the open gate, I walked in.”

“And the soldiers of the empire just watched you enter?”

“They didn’t just look at me – They pushed me from the rear so I could quickly gain the fort.”

The commander chuckled at my answer and then began to laugh. He laughed for a long time, his amazement clear. Then he got up, corrected his posture, and bowed his head to me politely.

“If we make it through this, I will honor you greatly.”

In response to his gratitude, I replied by saying that I would surely be claiming that generous award he offered me. I then left the conference hall.

* * *

The commander of the Imperial Army was in a bad mood.

The fortress had been besieged for two months, and its fall was within his reach, and then a strange guy appeared and disrupted everything. The very precious paladin that the third princeps sent to him was slain. It was close to a force majeure, yet it was unlikely that the third princeps, who was stupid, would consider such extenuating circumstances.

If he had the fortress in his hand, he could turn the tide and keep his head, but his attempt has failed. Everything was a right mess.

“Why does he come all this way, onto the battlefield?” the commander swore as he thought of the third princeps.

If the siege had been a success in the first place, there would never have been such an abnormal offensive from a fortress that had by all rights fallen, and there would have been no need to worry about the paladin’s death.

Many things had gone very wrong, and now the commander was facing oblivion, yet he knew the situation didn’t allow him to merely resent it. He had to find a way to somehow keep his life.

And there was only one way.

He had to capture the fortress and dedicate the act to the third princeps. It was a bitter idea, but he knew it was the only way in which to save his neck.

“Tonight, we attack the fort again.”

He immediately called up the knights who would be leading the operation. It was to be a full-on defensive targeting the entire wall.

After all, there were not many remaining troops. If they were lucky, they would be able to capture the fort by the evening.

“What about the two-swords knight?” asked one of the knights.

“We’ll ignore him. No matter how monster-like, he is but one man in the end. He can’t turn the tide alone.”

That monster-like knight would have to run wild in all four directions to guard the walls. If the fortress was hit from all sides, it would eventually fall into the empire’s

hands.

One of the knights expressed further concern, asking if they had to prepare for the worst. His was a very shrunken face.

The knight was pathetic, but the commander did not openly express this. Now wasn't the time to antagonize the knights. So, the commander said he would have the wizards focus on the knight with the twin swords. He urged his knights to rather focus on their assault upon the walls.

That's how the meeting ended, and the commander went straight back to the barracks to catch some sleep before the evening's action.

"Tonight will be a very long night."

He fell asleep as he laughed at the men of Dotrin, who had endured for two months. Then he suddenly opened his eyes, awake. There came noises from outside.

"What's out there!" he demanded loudly, and one of his knight escorts came in through the barracks door. The man's expression looked bad.

"It's a surprise attack by Dotrin!"

"That's nonsense!"

The magical flames raging across the fort have not yet been extinguished; the defenders could not afford a counter-attack.

"Our food stores are on fire! Both Sir Annu and Sir Goose, who were guarding that quarter, are incommunicado!"

"Why are you talking about them now?"

"I just heard the report tha-"

The commander shoved the knight away as the man made excuses, and left the barracks.

"Aah…" groaned the commander. The camp was in chaos, and the soldiers who had rested to prepare for the full-on assault were running about helter-skelter.

“How many enemies?” the commander asked in a cold voice as he ground his teeth.

“We still have to grasp-“

“They won’t be much. The fortress doesn’t have the manpower.”

The commander quickly grasped the situation, summoned the knights, and gave them their orders.

“Go get it done right now!”

The knights ran off, and the commander did not doubt that the chaos would soon be stemmed. Yet his certainty proved to be only hope. Some time had already passed, and yet the confusion has not subsided. Rather, it only increased.

“Commander, it would now be impossible to launch an evening offensive.”

The commander snapped awake.

“That was their aim.”

After he had grasped the enemy’s intentions, he summoned the knights to him. However, a small number of knights responded to his summons.

“It seems that it takes time to find the enemy who infiltrated the camp.”

The knights said their comrades would be back soon.

And some did return, or rather, their heads did.

“Give me a headcount, and get all the knights here right now!”

Some of the knights departed from the barracks to do this, and after some time, some of these knights also went missing. It was only then that the commander realized the gravity of the situation, and he summoned all the key officers and senior knights.

Nearly half of them did not arrive alive, with half of that half returning as headless corpses.

“This is an absurd situation!” shouted the commander.

In less than half a day, one-third of the officers in command of the legion had been assassinated or have disappeared. Among them were triple-chain knights.

He couldn’t believe it; he just couldn’t believe it.

The night passed, and none could attempt the scheduled offensive. Only in the morning could the commander determine the true extent of the damage.

“This…”

Dozens of corpses were laid out before his barracks. Among them were the knights who had gone out to save the food stores, while others had eagerly gone in hunt of the enemy.

And there were also precious wizards, dead. The commander felt dizzy upon this observation.

Now, the problem was not gaining the fort. In a single day, a third of the legion’s high-ranking officers had been slain.

The command structure had to be repaired at once, and the commander fired off orders.

Others were placed in the spots that had been vacated, with many officers being promoted to fill the gaps.

But it was pointless, for the next day, even more officers were slain.

“I told you to strengthen our perimeter!” the commander shouted, his anger having reached a peak. He collapsed into his seat. The knights had not ignored his commands; they had formed a patrol and guarded the camp together so that they could all aid each other in the event of a surprise attack.

The enemy skillfully slipped through the gaps. Because all the knights were gathered together, the enemy rather slew the front-line infantry officers, and half of their posts were vacated in this manner.

It had only been yesterday that the lesser officers had been promoted to serve as

higher-ranking officers. Now, however, many of them had to be demoted again to serve as front-line officers.

Things were going crazy, jumping to and fro.

“Choose the capable veterans and fill up the officer ranks.”

The commander had to form another messy command structure, and yet, the nightmare has just begun.

The enemy launched surprise attacks day and night. Countless officers died in the process, and soldiers no longer regarded becoming an officer as a good career move.

They wanted to remain soldiers rather than be exposed to the threat of assassination.

Still, the commander forced them into promotion. The problem was that the senior officers were still being targeted, and they refused to use the same barracks as the rank-and-file soldiers, also considering it a shame to dress like common soldiers.

And such arrogance led to their deaths.

Less than half of the officers now remained. It was an insufficient number to effectively command a legion. Food stores were burned, weapon stockpiles and siege engines were destroyed.

It was terrible, and even more terrible was the fact that the nature of the enemy had not been grasped up to this point – Who and how many they were, and even whether they came from Dotrin’s fortress.

The commander never saw a thing.

“Sir, I bring word that His Highness the Third Princeps will arrive in four days.”

To make matters worse, the incompetent third princeps would soon arrive.

The commander closed his eyes tightly.

“From today on, all officers will quarter with the soldiers in a single barracks. If you don’t wish to remove your armor and uniforms, then stay together so that the enemy

would not dare attack. We will assault the fortress tomorrow."

Once a new day dawned, the commander would order the attack.

The commanders had been culled to a significant extent, but their numbers were insignificant compared to the total strength of the legion.

"I should rather have neglected the camp's defense from the beginning and attacked at once. Then, things would not have reached this point."

The commander regretted it, so he was determined to correct his mistakes from here on out.

Unfortunately, he did not get the opportunity to do so, for a guest visited him overnight.

"It was you," said the commander with a haggard face when he confirmed the identity of the intruder.

There was a man, features hidden beneath a hood, who stood before him. Two swords were sheathed upon his back.

"It was impossible from the first, facing a monster like you. It is my fault, to believe that a knight like you would not be part of such a dishonorable mission."

"Are you provoking me?"

"You can not be proud. Your victory is a low thing, honorless."

After the commander had given up all hope, he mocked the knight.

However, the twin-sword knight accepted such insults casually.

"Oh, I'm not a knight."

"What?"

"I am a mercenary."

The man then laughed and introduced himself.

“Here is Ian, leader of the Veil Mercenary Company.”

The commander considered his foe to be so ashamed of conducting such a dishonorable mission that he now chose to conceal his identity. No mere mercenary would be powerful enough to defeat a paladin of the imperial palace or be able to beat back a legion on his own.

“You’ve tried hard, I’ll say that,” said the man who called himself Ian.

“A princeps of Burgundy has arrived. If you kill me, you will earn his wrath.”

The commander tried to work on the man’s fears, but he failed.

“That’s why you have to die.”

“What?”

“That way, the troops will act under the princeps’ will.”

Only then did the commander realize his enemy’s true scheme.

He might not know who the man was, but the man certainly knew who the third princeps was. How incompetent he was, how stupid, and how he will lead the army.

The enemy planned to make the imperial force self-destruct by placing the princeps in command.

“You bastard!” came the commander’s angry shout, and those were his only words.

‘Klsuck,’ he felt a pain at his throat, and the world turned white, hazy.

“I will take the reigns and care for the precious third princeps,” the man whispered into the commander’s ear. “I promise you: He will win and win. The fall of this fort will be his first triumph, and he will continue to attain many more victories.”

The commander opened his eyes when he heard that.

“That way, he’ll get closer to the throne.”

The commander had thought that, at best, his enemy was trying to save the fortress

and collapse at least one or two legions. No… he was about to shake the very foundations of the empire.

“You dare…” At last, realizing this fact, the commander desperately reached out and grabbed the man. However, his life had been on the brink of ending, and now it left him entirely, ending in vain.

* * *

A man who had once commanded a legion was now naught but a corpse.

Ian looked at the body and stretched his arms.

“After our work today, we have three day’s rest.”

Gunn appeared like a ghost from the darkness and gestured, (Fish That Met Water)

“What?”

(Nothing)

Ian dismissed Gunn’s gestures as insignificant. He started reciting a poem while holding onto his twin swords.

Then he tore out of the barracks and shouted, “The leader of the Veil Mercenaries, Ian, is here!”

The imperial knight escort who saw him were astonished and drew their swords.

Ian killed them as they were, and the mercenary with the twin golden blades swept through the camp.

The figure hiding in the shadows slashed the neck of an unfortunate knight, then saw the figure of Ian, touched her lips, and gestured (You Are Like Unbridled Foal)

As she said this, Ian looked very excited.

There was no Winter Castle to defend here, and there was no need to hold back due to being in imperial territory.

Ian was clearly enjoying the freedom of fighting upon a battlefield that did not bind him in any manner.

“Who dares deal with Ian, the leader of the Veil Mercenary Company!?” Ian roared as he stood tall over the corpses of the knights.

When the imperial soldiers saw him, they fell back.

* * *

Three days later, the third princeps arrived on the battlefield. He quickly rallied the troops whose command system had been severed and attacked High Seabreeze Fortress.

In front of the tactics and strategies employed by the third princeps, Dotrin’s fortress stood helpless.

In the process of taking the fort, the third princeps was captured by Dotrin’s Sword Master.

Yet, due to the infinite wisdom of the princeps, he managed to make his escape.

While being held, he discovered the fortress’s weaknesses, gaining a clue as to how he would capture the fortress that the imperial forces had failed to take for two whole months.

And finally, the fortress fell.

There was no pursuit of the defenders that fled, and this was by strict military order from the third princeps.

“I don’t know who it is, but there is a righteous man in there who helped me escape. They might be the people of Dotrin, but they gladly rescued me and gave up their secrets. He said, ‘The people of Dotrin are waiting for you to come, oh princeps.’ He said that he feared that his comrades, who were hoping to be freed from the wicked Dotrin’s tyranny, would be hurt in a pursuit, so he begged me for mercy, to call off such a chase.”

The imperial army praised the kindness of the princeps for regarding the enemy’s people as precious as the empire’s own, and they praised the name of the third

princeps who had managed to capture the impregnable fortress.

It was known so well that it ended up being known at all.

# CHAPTER 142
# THE DAY WHEN THE SKY ROAD OPENS (1)

Some fortresses of Dotrin, starting with High Seabreeze, began to fall. First came the fortresses to the southwest, those adjacent to High Seabreeze Fortress. The forts in the west were gained next, and soon enough, all military bases near the border were destroyed or captured by the imperial forces.

This was about five months after the war began.

The imperial army had incurred great casualties and had lost its momentum to the intense resistance of the Dotrin Kingdom's armies, so they ended up garrisoning themselves in the captured strongholds and fortresses.

Meanwhile, contingents of troops dispatched from the empire were approaching the front one after the other. After the imperial forces were reorganized with the influx of reinforcements, the legions caught their breaths and were preparing to march out once more. Yet, before they could leave the fortresses to advance into Dotrin's territory and take their first step toward a greater victory, it happened… All the fortresses that they occupied collapsed in upon them, with the structures roaring as they came tumbling down.

The fortresses had endured the intensive attacks of wizards, yet they now crumbled like castles of sand. It was all too sudden for the imperial forces to respond to, and as the structures fell, so too did flames rage through all the strongholds.

In one fortress, legionnaires and knights were hosting a banquet to welcome the nobles and those troops who had arrived from the mainland. The commanders of another fortress were celebrating a hard-won victory. Then there was a fortress where the commanders had neglected to sleep, being in the midst of formulating tactics and strategies for the coming advance.

All of them were crushed as the fortresses collapsed in upon their heads. Those with broken bodies cried out, while those on the verge of death were sobbing and weeping.

A few principes and legionaries were protected by mighty wizards and paladins, and they then employed such magic to rescue soldiers.

It was a situation of utmost confusion, yet this was not the end of the disaster.

The troops of Dotrin assaulted the strongholds where the tragedies had occurred, launching a large-scale offensive across the entire front.

The imperials couldn't even hope to respond as imperial knights and soldiers desperately fled from the ruined fortresses. The forces of Dotrin persisted in pursuing these fleeing imperial forces.

After a nightmarish week, the imperial forces that yet lived after fleeing beyond the borders of Dotrin numbered less than half of the total that were deployed.

The estimated casualties stood at 40,000.

Add to that number the missing nobles and knights, and the damage the empire suffered in a single week was of a tremendous magnitude. It was the equivalent of destroying a few lesser kingdoms.

The consumption of human resources was severe, and a great number of supplies were lost. Even as huge and mighty as the empire was, carnage on this great a level could not be ignored.

In the meantime, more news came.

The second and fourth principes, who had been organizing troops on the front line, returned to the empire as corpses. The surviving legion commanders and nobles trembled as they dreaded the anger of the emperor that they would soon face.

They all flocked to the third princeps' banner to escape the emperor's wrath. In a war plagued by setbacks and defeats, only the third princeps had managed to attain significant victories.

Surprisingly, the third princeps was the only person who noticed the signs of the impending terrible disaster, and at the same time, he was hailed as the hero who managed to return to the empire with the greatest number of troops.

It came to be known through the third princeps that the fortresses of Dotrin had

been designed to collapse immediately once some manner of device was triggered.

The terrible catastrophe that occurred on the front was not a natural disaster but rather the ploy of the Kingdom of Dotrin.

As the facts became known, fear became anger.

The nobles of the empire proclaimed they would seek bloody vengeance, and the emperor condoned it instead of accepting the shame of defeat, the sin of failure.

Knights and legions from all over the empire gathered on the border with Dotrin.

The time has come for the Second Dotrin Offensive to be launched.

* * *

“Please, endless glory to the Burgundy Imperial Family!”

“Long live His Majesty!”

The knights shouted with fervor as they drew their swords and struck them to their heads. The holy war was heralded by the spilling of crimson blood.

The emperor observed the scene without much of an expression.

And then, he spoke.

“Remove them.”

His was a petulant, dismissive voice – As if ordering servants to remove spilled food from the floor after a feast. The knights had been awaiting his judgment and received the order with hard faces. Once, they had been glorious imperial knights, but they had now turned into penitents after failing to protect their masters. They were removed from the hall like garbage.

“Hmm.” The emperor’s eyes took it all in, and then he beat his fist upon the armrest of his throne.

‘Dok, Dok~’

There was a heavy silence in the hall.

In that hall, the dukes and marquis of the empire, prim as peacocks, knelt upon the floor as they waited for the emperor to speak.

The first question the emperor asked was not about his flesh and blood, nor did it concern the tens of thousands of soldiers who had died.

“They call him Ian of the twin swords?”

It was a question about some lowly mercenary, and this was terribly strange.

This Ian wasn’t a person who was widely known, nor was he a person who had greatly influenced worldly affairs. He was merely a Sword Master who had briefly appeared in battle on the southwestern front. His was a trivial existence, and none would have known his name were it not for the report of the third princeps.

It wasn’t a name that the emperor, leader of the glorious empire, found worthy to speak of.

But the nobles didn’t dare speak up and ask about it. The emperor was not a man who explained his wants, his plans; no, he was the one who gave commands. The emperor’s decisions were always in the right; all were forced to believe this.

To question is to be disloyal, and the emperor held no mercy for the disloyal.

The same counted for the present scene as the nobles remained prostrated, waiting for the emperor’s command.

“Tell that name to the master of the Ivory Tower,” spake the emperor.

“If he doesn’t come out, I myself will awaken my purity to make it so.”

Some nobles inadvertently raised their heads, and as they met the emperor’s gaze, they hurriedly shut their eyes. The emperor’s eyes were shining with a strange light.

His gaze was too profound to be contained within a single human being – It was like staring into an abyss. The nobles felt terror as if their souls had been shattered and scattered by confronting that gaze for the briefest of moments.

However, they couldn't stay trembling forever. They had to answer, for the emperor despised it if none answered his words.

"I will leave it as it is."

The emperor gestured with his hand, and the nobles left the hall, breathless, almost running.

"Do you think he is the one you are looking for?" a voice asked from somewhere in the empty hall.

No one would dare to ask the emperor a question without being before him; to do so was beyond disrespectful. However, the emperor did not shout, demanding that the person reveal themself, nor was he upset by the question.

"It is unknown." He even kindly answered the question. "I'll just watch for now."

The emperor buried himself deeper into his throne.

"If he is really the one Your Majesty is looking for, the high-ranking wizards of the tower will be a stepping stone for him to reach a higher place."

"He's not bad either." The emperor laughed softly, and it was terribly dry laughter that sounded like the sands of the desert dunes being swept away by the wind.

"What do you find so mirthful?" asked the voice, and when the emperor replied, he was laughing still.

"Even if I step on it and step on it, the ancient traces that resound within my head are so pitiful and so lovely."

"If you wish, I could go prune the bud right away. The young prince who has taken the fate of a kingdom on his shoulders, and the mercenary who has proclaimed himself to be a one-man legion. I will cut their throats and offer their heads to Your Majesty."

"I don't want that."

The emperor did no allow such actions.

“Go to the front lines and observe.”

The emperor allowed only this.

“And finally return and tell me all, as if I had been there in person.”

The voice replied that the emperor’s orders were stern – And that they would be followed.

* * *

All of the fortresses of Dotrin had collapsed, and the strongholds were neutralized. Dotrin’s army had withdrawn deep into the kingdom’s borders. The imperial forces advanced further into Dotrin territory without hesitation. What hindered them were the endless forests of the land.

The roads through the dense forests were in a poor state and far too narrow for large forces to march along.

So the commanders decided that the army would be split into three corps. Some were concerned by such a division of forces, but they were in the minority. The first division had the least number of troops at 25,000. The main force was a large corps, 50,000 strong, while the troops in the final corps numbered 30,000.

The power that each corps held was enough to destroy an entire kingdom, and the defeat of each was an impossibility in the first place.

“Dotrin’s forests are like a maze. Entering a forest like this without trusting in your troops is like grabbing a spear and leaping into a fire.”

Several members of the command staff continued to express their concern. The nobles’ hearts have been poisoned by the defeat of the First Offensive, so such prudence was unpleasant to them. All the commanders and officers urging caution were executed on the pretext of degrading military morale.

The commanders ordered the march toward the forest after having dealt with the dissenters.

They decided that, in the case of unpleasant events and in preparation for the eventual reformation of the field army, the three forces would keep a certain

distance between them and keep close contact all the while.

It was extremely common sense and was a solid strategy.

However, their common sense and prudent strategizing proved insignificant in the face of the primeval forests.

The movement of tens of thousands of troops along the narrow roads that wound through the dense forests was an operation that required terrible patience.

The impatient commanders soon became fed up with the slow movement, so much so that they eventually sent messengers to the vanguard to chide them and urge greater haste.

However, the soldiers at the fore had their own grievances.

Firstly, the roads were too narrow. Secondly, these narrow roads were in ill-repair and hard to traverse. And the third point was that they had to be on a constant lookout for the defending Dotrin forces who could attack at any time and from anywhere.

They said that it would be weirder if they moved fast and very unwise.

Special measures had to be implemented, so the imperial commanders decided that the solution lay in employing manpower. Many of the troops in the vanguard had their spears and swords replaced with axes and sickles. Nearly 10,000 soldiers were set to work to slash out the bushes that grabbed onto men's ankles and to fell the giant trees that blocked the advance, and in so doing, broaden the road.

The march was still slow-going, but the pace had picked up.

Of course, that was how the commanders experienced it.

The experience was far different for the soldiers in the van. It was a struggle to endure the constant labor with ax and sickle in hot weather and in an environment where it was difficult to walk, much less work.

But it wasn't just the heat that brought such tormenting pain to the soldiers that they wished for death.

In the shade of the forest, in spots that had not been exposed to direct sunlight for eons, there lived horrible worms. This unknown species followed the soldiers around by day, latching onto them and sucking their blood. Even though these worm-victims moved all day long as they labored, their entire bodies would be terribly swollen all over by the time their day's work was done.

The soldiers couldn't sleep properly, so great was the constant itching and pain.

However, the commanders didn't care about the grievances of these soldiers at all.

Most of the commanders were knights skilled enough to prevent such parasites from feeding off of them by channeling their mana. And those commanders lacking such ability enjoyed the presence of the wizards, who ensured comfort even in the blazing heat of the forest.

So, these men could not sympathize with the pain that the soldiers were suffering through.

They only took note once the majority of the troops who had been clearing the forest fell into comatose states due to some unidentified disease carried by the worms.

Only then did the commanders mobilize wizards to perform large-scale extermination work.

These wizards used a form of newly-developed magic to control the worms, or they used birds and other insectivorous beasts, natural predators of the bugs, to drive out or kill the worms in the area.

Of course, these efforts weren't enough to get rid of all the swarms of vampiric worms.

At least they had been able to stop the spread of the disease. Soon enough, more troops were suborned to the logging operations.

Soldiers constantly swung sickles and axes so that they could escape the hellish forest as soon as possible. The marching speed of the sluggish troops slightly increased, yet only for a while.

Not a peep had been heard from the troops of the Dotrin Kingdom. They now attacked the vanguard.

The troops in the van had removed their helms and armor to clear the forest, they were too tired to effectively use their weapons, and they were all wielding heavy axes and sickles – They were slaughtered without even being able to mount a proper resistance.

Knights and wizards managed to repel the enemy, yet not many soldiers of Dotrin had lost their lives as they retreated back into the forest.

That was the beginning.

Dotrin forces would appear from time to time and assault the vanguard. And once a proper melee battle broke out, they would quickly escape. Now those in the advance lines did not have only the terrible forest to contend with, but also the Royal Dotrin Army.

The faster marching speed had once more slowed down.

Now the soldiers in the logging teams had to work in their armor, and they had to be prepared for attacks from the Dotrin troops who could strike at any time and from anywhere.

One after the other, these men began to faint in the heat.

Those that did not faint exhausted quickly, their bodies battling against the heat, and their minds plunged into fear of an enemy that could strike at any moment.

The commanders of the vanguard sent daily messages to inform the central command of such difficulties. However, the central body of troops had been moving along the path cleared by the vanguard without much difficulty and was thus unable to comprehend the perils faced by the van.

The commanders of the vanguard cried out, urging their soldiers to bear on. Regardless of the heat, the primary objective was to get out of the forest.

Seemingly noticing the renewed vigor of the logging teams, Dotrin's ambushes and surprise attacks increased in pace.

Now those of Dotrin didn't only conduct small-scale attacks; they would appear in legion formations and annihilate logging teams and logistic units.

It was at that time that knights and wizards from the central body and the rearguard appeared in the advanced ranks after repeated requests for aid.

Once they joined up with the van, it became difficult for the forces of Dotrin to use the element of surprise in their favor. Several of the Dotrin Mountain Infantry companies that attacked were wiped out. After that, Dotrin ceased all surprise attacks.

If the commanders had known this would be the case, they would have sent the knights and wizards to the fore from the start. The commanders of the vanguard were greatly relieved.

But it was an illusion: This brief peace they enjoyed was merely the eve before the storm.

Three legions of the domed kingdom of Dotrin attack the stretched-out lines of marching soldiers. The imperials rallied and managed to drive their attackers off, but the damage was considerable.

Valuable wagons bearing rations were burned, and precious weapons were plundered or destroyed.

But even more terrible was that the imperial legions that had faced intense assault were plunged into the forest, scattered into it.

If it had been a different, more conventional battlefield, they would have soon regrouped and reformed their lines. However, they were now in the middle of the forest, hemmed in from all sides. Very few of them returned. The vast majority of them never made it back from the woods: It was as if the forest itself had devoured them.

Only then did the commanders of the vanguard feel true terror.

With a great army of 100,000 soldiers, they could destroy the Dotrin Kingdom many times over; they had been confident of this. It proved to be a terrible misjudgment brought on by their arrogance and ignorance.

They now remembered those commanders who had expressed their concerns, emphasizing the dangers of the forest, yet these men had already been executed. So the commanders simply marched their troops on with little regret.

The attacks by the forces of Dotrin continued.

They always seemed to appear out of the woods, dragging the imperial soldiers deeper into the forest by launching concentrated attacks.

Once forced into the forest, it was over.

However, nothing in this world was endless, and the same adage held true for the forest.

The forest that seemed to be eternal finally cleared out.

“It’s over!” We’re out!” the soldiers of the Imperial army cheered as they ran out of the woods.

If things were done properly, according to the usual protocol, the commanders would have held these soldiers back. They would have sent out scouts to report on the situation outside the forest.

However, the forest has eroded the judgment and patience of soldier and commander alike, and it had eventually bred in them a blind hunger for a world outside the forest, so dense and overbearing.

“Open space! Oh god!”

Soldiers and commanders knelt down as they kissed the dry ground – And thousands of arrows rained into the joyous imperial army. Thousands of soldiers were pierced by these arrows and became cooling corpses.

“Shield wall! Heavy infantry!”

“Archers, form up! Counterfire!”

Commanders who realized their peril too late within that terrible baptism of arrows bellowed orders as they prepared their forces for a response.

Heavy infantry lifted their shields, and their lines advanced step by bloody step. The imperial archers formed up ranks behind the heavy infantry and fired their arrows at once.

“The most urgent need is to get all our troops into the open! Those who are ready for battle, go ahead and open the way!”

The commanders continued to shout out their orders.

While they responded to the enemy’s attack, they sent out messengers to inform the soldiers in the rear of the situation. The commanders decided that the moment the entire force showed up and became battle-ready, less than a handful of Dotrin’s soldiers would no longer be a problem.

However, the troops in the forest they were waiting for still had some way to march. They were not yet in a position to support them.

“It is the Knights of Dotrin!”

Dotrin’s knights and wizards, who had not revealed themselves until now, were stirring throughout the entire forest. Imperial knights and wizards rushed to respond quickly, but they were too widespread and drawn out. Without even able to mount a proper resistance, countless knights and wizards exchanged the temporal for the eternal as they met their deaths.

However, due to the imperial army having so many soldiers, a great majority survived these attacks. Those knights and wizards who yet lived gathered around the paladins.

“Show them the might of our great nation!” a paladin roared epically and then led the charge against Dotrin’s knights.

However, just before the paladin reached the front ranks of the knights he was aiming at, a man suddenly stepped from behind a tree and blocked him off.

The man, wielding twin swords that flashed golden, shouted, “Here is the Veil Mercenary Ian!”

# CHAPTER 143
# THE DAY WHEN THE SKY ROAD OPENS (2)

One of the imperial knights saw me and popped out from behind a tree.

I killed him where he stood by baring my mana heart. The pace of the other knights charging at me slowed, but they didn't stop. They just became more cautious.

My name was still close to unknown in the Imperial Army. Even if I captured energy through the power of poetry, I was apparently still known merely as a common mercenary.

They wished to trample me and figured that they would be able to do so with ease. But they didn't know: They would soon fall as if stones were chained to their ankles. The paladin in the lead ignored me, passing me by.

I didn't stop him.

Instead, the knights following him were cut down one after the other.

"Noo!"

"Hold!"

The paladin, who was charging ahead with continuous roars, swiveled around.

"Bastard!" he shouted as he brought his sword about and charged at me.

I smiled as I saw such a paladin and threw myself back into the forest. The paladin's angry bellows could be heard behind my back, but I ignored them. I didn't mean to waste my time and energy on a paladin. Today I wished to defeat as many imperial knights as possible.

I hid in the forest and once more charged when the time was right.

The imperial knights who were in close melee with the knights of Dotrin came under

my assault one more, and many of them fell by my unexpected strikes in an instant.

“You’re like a rat!” roared the livid paladin as his energy flared up. He saw that I planned to hide in the forest once more, so he readied his blade and came crashing into me in an instant.

I intersected his blow with my twin blades, then slashed out with my right-hand sword.

‘Krguck!’ the tip of my blade touched his breastplate with an uncomfortable, grinding noise.

The powerful knight shook his sword as he widened the distance between us.

In that moment, I ran back into the woods.

The same process was repeated countless times. I wandered about, weaving in and out of the imperial army, defeating knights.

Those who seemed interested in me for even a moment were ignored. I was only dedicated to slaying a large number of knights.

As a result, once our offensive was over, I had been able to defeat many a knightly enemy.

As dawn broke, the sound of a horn sounded through the forest.

It was the signal of our planned retreat.

I pulled myself out of battle without hesitation, joining up with Dotrin’s knights, and escaped the forest.

When I arrived at the main encampment, an old man was waiting for me.

It was the former fortress commander of High Seabreeze fortress, Berg Berten, and the old knights who followed him.

I watched him staring at me like a baby bird waiting for its momma bird, and I began laughing.

“Why the look? Didn’t the returning knights tell you of the result?”

“They told us that we won, but no one told us any details. Even when I tried to pry, they all had faces that seemed as if they would faint at any moment, so it made me feel sorry to bother them so,” grunted Berg.

“So let me tell you now, Berg,” I answered curtly, “it’s a victory. We won overwhelmingly.”

“In detail?” pressed the old man.

“The forces they fielded, despite their stretched lines, were overwhelmingly powerful. But our allied forces prevailed on each battlefield, and the enemy was scattered. Dotrin’s knights rushed about as they trampled over the foe. The moment the enemies finally formed up their ranks and tried to respond, we retreated.”

Berg Berten and his knights exchanged glances. I saw that they were trying to picture the battles that took place based on my report.

“So how knights did you defeat?” asked he.

“Add three-hundred gold coins to my fee.”

Berg frowned after I said this.

“Well? Didn’t I say I would do only my part? Anyway, a deal is a deal.”

“Ah, but I thought you would handle more enemies,” the elderly man said as if asking why I didn’t do more. I could see he was trying to tell me, “War is not a joke.”

“Dotrin is in a total war with the empire right now. Do you want me to exert myself outside the bounds of our bet?”

“It’s not about how many dead knights we wagered on, but rather that you are able to kill more than that. So what is the problem? The more you kill, the more you aid your allies. Don’t take the bet too seriously, in our own way, we made a bet so that you would aid your allies as much as possible by killing many enemies, so we were hoping for more,” came the Blatant reply from Berg, and his old knights nodded in agreement.

“That makes sense,” said I and shut my mouth.

After I had finished a few of my duties, I tried to return to my tent, but the old people followed me. It wasn’t a new thing anymore; Berg Berten and his elderly knights had become my shadows.

They had given up all their titles and retired completely once the retreat from High Seabreeze was a success.

The first reason for them doing so was that someone had to take responsibility for the fortress being captured, and the second reason was that an old man who took undue risks and could not properly read the tide of battle could not lead soldiers.

Dotrin’s central command took care of the civilians and the injured and tried to convince Berg to retire to his estate, but he refused.

He put everything down, renounced all his titles, and began following me.

I hated it, but Berg did manage to persuade me with his inspiring words.

“I have a lot of money,” was what he said.

There was no reason for me not to accept an alternative flow of income, seeing as I had to fight the imperial army anyway.

To Berg Berten, I was the official commander of the Veil Mercenaries.

“Hmgghm,” Berg coughed whilst I was contemplating such things, turning my attention to him. I turned around and saw that the old man was staring at me.

“You are strong, no doubt. But war is not a joke.”

“If you bet on how many I kill and then say war is not a joke, aren’t you contradicting yourself?”

The old man ignored my glib response and continued to talk.

“The battle has just ended, and with your own mouth, you said you killed a hundred enemies, yet you remain so calm. It all seems rather fun to you. The other knights don’t look at it this way.”

The old man's eyes looked sunken; they had a sorrow-filled depth to them.

"Some of these men have killed someone for the first time in their lives today. Even those with a sense of duty who had pledged to die fighting for Dotrin are aggrieved by the blood on their hands. You don't act like that, you don't have such grief."

I now turned around all the way and looked straight into Berg Berten's eyes.

"I can't even guess how much murder has been done by your hand. If you have reached this level as a mercenary by fighting from a young age, then you must have slaughtered many."

"So, what do you want to tell me?"

"Don't be one to consider the lives of other people as meaningless. Kill the enemy, but be reverent. And do not joke around in the face of death, do not ridicule the death of your foes."

I looked at Berg and nodded.

"I will remember that."

"Murgh," Berg grunted in a strained manner. Had my answer sounded insincere?

"Something is wrong with you, Ian. Something is missing from you. Only you don't seem to realize this." The old man shook his head sadly as he said this, and was grabbed by his old knights.

"That's enough, Sir Berten. Let's go get some strong drink," urged a knight.

"Just this once, yes," came Berg's weak reply.

Berg Berten and his old knights headed off somewhere after they said this.

I was left alone, feeling stupid, and then saw Bernardo Eli and Gwain appear from afar.

I told them of the conversation I had with Berg.

Bernardo laughed.

“That old bag is full of himself. I’m just happy that I’m not covered in piss and shit after this battle. If we don’t kill them, we die, so what? Must we see their flesh as sacred? Must we consider the feelings of the man rushing at us before we stab into him?” said Bernardo as he looked at him. For once, there wasn’t a tone of sarcasm to his words.

“Don’t worry yourself with such senile sentiments. Because you are doing well.”

As Bernardo smiled at his own assertion, Gwain spoke up.

“Berg is not wrong.”

“You’re going to spout some bullshit again!” Bernardo shouted at Gwain as emotion flared up in his eyes.

“It is true that Commander Ian is missing something somewhere. He’s somewhat inhumane.”

“You bastard, do you know what you’re saying!?”

“I don’t have to lie in admitting this. Commander Ian is a war fanatic.”

Extreme anger came to Bernardo’s face, and I have never seen him show such emotions.

“You bastard! How can you say that!? His Highness fought for Winter Castle! The orcs gained the wall! Rangers were dying one after the other! Did you ever see His Highness jump into the fray alone to save those men, until his body became a tattered mess of wounds!?”

My heart grew dark.

Up till now, I knew all the knights of Dotrin were treating me as a mercenary, which was right. They respected my skills yet did not appreciate the baseness of my motives or my attitude of being a battle fanatic.

I was like the mercenary king, the composer of the [Golden Poem]. I was treated exactly like that, just like Berg Berten had treated me just now.

I didn’t truly care about it, but Bernardo seems to have unwittingly taken such stress

upon himself with his sudden rampage. His excitement has reached a peak, with him calling me 'Highness.' I tried to stop him, but he didn't hear me over his own words. This was because Bernardo Eli was locked into his own unpleasant memories.

"The day when Winter Castle fell… Do you know that His Highness was half-dead, almost a corpse? And that half-unconscious man put a horn to his mouth and kept signaling the retreat! And do you know what he said?"

Even though I felt embarrassed, the old memories being revived by Bernardo's passion blocked my speech.

"I will make the time myself. My chest is split and my wrists are weakened. I cannot control my own body! Everyone, flee! Retreat! I cannot recognize who is before me, who is a lancer, or who is not. I don't even know where you are, and you'll be left behind. So go… Flee…"

I instinctively closed my eyes. I did say that, yet I couldn't remember. I was half-conscious at the time.

"And you call him a war fanatic? What would a child of fifteen or sixteen know of such things?"

Maybe Bernardo suffered from nightmares, from the nightmare of that day when Winter Knights and Black Lancers threw away their lives to save me. That might be why Bernardo was speaking so rabidly that the spittle flew from his mouth.

I tried to calm my grief and then opened my eyes with sudden vigor.

"The Warlord. Anyone who remembers crying as they felt the presence of that beast would not say such things. No!"

Bernardo now snarled, looking ready to draw his sword and slice Gwain's throat.

"Shut up, Gwain. Before I kill you."

How excited he was! I caught Bernardo's arm as his hand slipped to the hilt of his sword. Then I shook my head.

"Aaah!" Bernardo cried as he looked at me, then kicked at the ground.

The man, who held such resentment within him, took his hand from his sword.

“So, Your Highness, do not prick your ears to the bullshit of the elderly. What’s wrong is the times that we live in, not Your Highness.”

As Bernardo said this, he marched off in a direction with a ‘thump, thump,’ of his boots.

“Where are you going!?” I demanded.

“I’m going to rest!”

“Our barracks is on the other side!”

Bernardo groaned, turned about, and passed us by.

“I didn’t know, but I won’t apologize,” said Gwain as I stared at Bernardo’s back.

“It’s okay. With the things between us – We will never be apologizing to each other,” came my profound reply. Yet, Gwain pressed his point.

“But it is true that you are somewhat inhumane. That’s why I feel reluctant to apologize. Well, it’s like staring into the heart of winter. There is no life, only death.”

I shrugged.

Gwain wasn’t that wrong.

Because I am not a human but a sword, and not a sword but a devil.

* * *

After that day’s battle, the imperial forces did not rush out of the forest. They formed their ranks up tight and interspersed their knights and paladins at regular intervals to ensure that they were prepared for surprise attacks. Additionally, the imperial wizards regularly employed large scale exploration-magic, and the chances of using the element of surprise diminished to a great extent.

Several surprise attacks ended with no gains and only casualties on our side. The commanders of Dotrin conducted daily meetings.

Although significant damage had been done to the empire's vanguard, the main body and the rearguard remained intact. Before they left the forest, we had to inflict as much damage as possible.

But it wasn't easy.

To shake up the empire's great army had become no simple task, as, over time, they had adapted to battling in the forest to some extent.

If there was any comfort, it was that the third princeps, who had been recognized for his contributions in the last war and firmly established himself as a leader, stood as commander of the main corps.

Such a situation had to be unfortunate for the empire.

According to intelligence reports, it was the third princeps who had pushed the vanguard on so forcefully. In fact, the incompetent and impatient third princeps had left the advance lines on their backs, like tortoises.

And then it was said that it was the third prince who had saved the vanguard just before it broke down. It was by his orders that the knights, wizards, and paladins of the main body had been sent out to aid the van. The commanders of the advance line ended up being held accountable for their tragic defeats, while the princeps gained the honors for saving them.

It was a strong-armed and practical response so unlike my idiotic destroyer of the empire.

"There must be a person with brains by the side of the third princeps."

I was certain of this.

There was someone beside him, someone not only intelligent but also skilled enough to give the princeps wise council while enduring his personality.

I was half-wrong, half-right.

I was correct in surmising that someone with an agile mind stood beside the third princeps. However, my idea that he counseled the princeps on what commands to give was in error.

He was one who didn't have to council the princeps; no, it was rather the third princeps who followed this man's will.

I realized this when we were about to smash through the imperial army's logistical force, which was under heavy guard in the depths of the forest.

"Hold."

We had defeated the imperial knights who had resisted until the end, but I now stopped in my tracks, without even considering drawing one of the swords strapped to my back.

'Buduk, Buduk, Buduk,' my heart beat faster, pounding.

I released the energy in my mana heart into the surrounding area, ignoring the will of the [Golden Poem].

My mana arose and headed in all directions.

'Gwoo-woo—ooh-ooh~'

Even though the mercenary king's poem was protecting me, my heart did not stop pounding. My neck creaked as I turned my head.

"Ah…"

And I saw it: On a clear day with nary a cloud, dark clouds had gathered into a single place.

'Krrdga~ Krrdguu~'

Thunder rumbled in the massed clouds, 'Krgka! Krgka!' and dozens of lightning bolts struck the earth, with their thundering sound following moments later.

The bolts stopped flashing, and the sound of thunder subsided.

But I still couldn't move, for this was a mighty being who had summoned this lightning and thunder. I clenched my teeth under that terrible presence and then shouted with my mana, "Retreat! Retreat!"

Dotrin's knights and soldiers had been fascinated by the spectacle, yet they now turned to me.

"Run away, you idiots!" They were crushed by my strong flow of mana, yet some managed to ask, "Where are we going?"

"Abandon the operation! Return straight to camp! Run for as long as you can!"

Forgetting that I was but a single mercenary ordering them, they rushed from the battlefield without even having attacked the logistical units or destroying any supplies.

As I ran along the trees, I cried, "Run away! Flee as far as possible! Watch where you run!"

The knights and soldiers had stiffened under the sudden flaring up of magical energies, yet now pulled themselves together after hearing my words.

I kept running.

The troops deployed for this massive surprise attack were close to half of the total defensive line. If they were wiped out, the front line was bound to collapse.

I had to get them all out.

There wasn't enough time, for the tremendous presence I had felt was coming from the road to this side of the forest.

I urged the soldiers on with my mana-enhanced shouts, and I ran like that for a long time.

"Huh?"

The great presence disappeared like a mirage.

I halted where I was and looked up at the sky. There were great banks of dark clouds that I hadn't even known had gathered.

"Haha," I laughed as I watched thunder arcing through the clouds.

“Somehow, I thought things would go well.”

At that moment, the entire world was engulfed in light.

# CHAPTER 144
# THE DAY WHEN THE SKY ROAD OPENS (3)

Those who first noticed the phenomenon were the wizards of Dotrin.

“This, this…”

“Oh my God-“

The wizards, who rarely left their quarters, ran from the barracks at once. They all looked at the same place as if sensing something was different.

Black specks spread all across the sky, and in the same way as ink dissolved in water, so too did the sky become dark. The wizards trembled.

Mana was raging across the entire area, and the wizards quickly became confused. They were facing such a great torrent of mana as they had never faced before.

‘Krrurrrueng!’ the black clouds vomited thunder. Some of the wizards were upset, angered, and they headed straight to the head commander.

“What is it?” demanded the commander with a firm face as he saw the pale-faced wizards.

“Tremendous! A sign of great magic!” a wizard shouted, adding, “At least an archmage-level wizard has appeared on the battlefield!”

The commander and the knights sprang into action and ran from their barracks before the wizard was even done speaking. And at that moment, a great roar erupted from the sky.

‘Kwwaa aaang Gwaang!’

It sounded as if the heavens were falling and the world would end. The knights looked to the western sky with hopeless faces. The dark clouds that covered the sky were constantly striking the earth with dozens of lightning bolts.

It was in the direction of Dotrin's outpost.

* * *

The messenger who was sent out under order finally returned, and he could barely give his report, his face as ashen as that of a corpse.

"All! It's all burned down! All that's left is black ash."

The situation at the outpost became known through the mouth of the messenger who spewed as much gibberish as he formed words: Broken barriers, barracks blackened by fire, and scorched corpses. According to the messenger, the outpost had become hell on earth.

The commander dispatched a search team, yet they could find no signs of survivors. The eight knight squadrons and four elite legions of the outpost have disappeared, without a single survivor.

Forty percent of the troops of the front line of defense evaporated overnight.

The commander had a heavy heart and only later remembered the large-scale ambush strike force that had been sent out. He had forgotten all about them in the tumult.

"At least half of the troops must have left the outpost on their sortie! We have to find them!"

It was so, for some of the troops quartered at the outpost had been out on the mission, and they now returned to the command encampment.

However, the commander had no reason to be pleased.

Through the survivors, he learned that a demon had destroyed the outpost, cutting through the allied forces. The occasional thunderstorm confirmed their words as truth.

The night was deep and long, and the number of survivors who trickled into the camp grew less and less. Sometime after the next day dawned, a knight stumbled into the headquarters and exclaimed, "The leader of the Veil Mercenaries is still fighting!"

The report went that the Sword Master of the twin swords was battling the demon. He was making time for his allies to escape, preventing the demon from rushing after them.

A couple of old men sitting in the headquarters jumped from their seats as they heard the knight's words.

"We're going into the forest!"

It was Berg Berten and his old knights.

"I made a fuss, and now a promising young man is saving our skins. Maybe he misunderstood me. Either way, I feel responsible."

Berg went on to say that it might be because of him that the mercenary commander had drawn his swords to face such magic. Berg buckled his sword to his waist, ready to go.

"He has aided us a lot, but I cannot risk my knights to save a single mercenary," said the commander.

"I don't need help. I don't intend to take your knights into danger when we old uncles can do a more proper job."

The commander was just about to open his mouth in response to the old man – who was resolved to face death – when the door of the headquarters was flung open, and someone appeared through the aperture.

"The squadron of Berten need not risk themselves," said the man, and the commander's knights widened their eyes as they saw him enter. The man looked at these knights, raised his finger, and pointed to the sky.

At the same time, the command barracks shook, as if from a heavy wind.

'Kraaahahah!' something roared one second later.

"Because the Knights of the Sky have started their operations," said the man, Jin Katrin, with a grin.

Berg Berten ran out of the barracks like a madman, and his old knights and the

commander followed.

‘Fwooop, Fwooop~’

As if a great, bestial banner had been lofted above the barracks, the wyverns flew in breathtaking circles above the building.

“In my entire lifetime, I always wished to see the flying Wyvern Knights maneuvering as a group,” Berg said in an awed voice.

“Now you will see them often,” said Jin Katrin proudly, adding, “Our enemies shall fear the sky from now on, and will not dare enjoy the great greenery of our forests.”

* * *

The roles have changed.

Dotrin was no longer the hunters but the beasts being pursued.

“Don’t stop marching. Just a short while more and we are out of the forest. If we keep moving with haste like this, we will soon join up with the main force. Then we can all survive,” a knight encouraged the soldiers.

At that moment, a flashing light arose above his head. The knight looked at the others with a hopeless face. Such lights were floating above all the soldiers.

And in that dark forest, the brilliance of the flashes could be seen from some distance.

The wizards of the imperial army were determining the location of Dotrin’s forces and marking them by these hovering lights.

“Damn,” said the knight in desperation.

The same desperation was mirrored on the faces of the soldiers.

“Do not give up! Keep moving!” exclaimed the knight, urging his men to greater haste.

“If the enemy appears, do not stand and fight! Just run!”

Unlike the others, the knight gripped the hilt of his sword. If the imperial troops appeared, he planned to buy his men some time so they could save themselves.

However, determination alone cannot prevent the outcome of certain dire situations, and that proved to be the exact case now.

Unfortunately, it wasn't the imperial knights or soldiers who discovered the marked soldiers of Dotrin. It was the demon that had turned the forest into hell.

'Krgukgkguu!'

The knight raised his head. The sky was obscured by the thick branches and leaves of the forest roof. Still, the knight could sense a tremendous energy gathering beyond the foliage.

"Damn," he muttered, his sword hanging limply by his side.

I can't stop that.

And at that moment, the world became white, and the knight closed his eyes.

This was how we would die. He truly thought so.

'Kruaang!'

There came a roaring sound, and that was all. There wasn't the pain he had braced himself for, nor did he suffer an imminent death.

The knight opened his eyes. In front of him stood a man, exerting himself, and looking a right mess. In his hand, he gripped a sword that seemed aflame under the strikes of the lightning.

'Gschaschagscha!'

The glaring light tangled with the blade, drew away, and struck at it once more like a snake.

The man seemed to push back the light and shrug it from his sword. The light could not reform itself and was scattered in all directions as the knight watched on.

‘Quazzzik!’

A giant tree was cut right through the trunk as the light careened through it and then dissipated. Yet, the area was still lit.

“It hurts like hell!” shouted the man, and only then did the knight see the sorcerous mark floating above his head. It shone with a greater intensity and radius than anyone else’s the knight had encountered.

“What are you standing around for so blankly!? Run! Go!” the man shouted.

Only then did the knight snap to his sense and urge his soldiers on.

“I want to know your name! If I live through this and return, I will honor you!” the knight asked just before following his men into the forest.

But the man didn’t answer. He just stood staring at the sky whilst holding his sword.

* * *

“…!”

The knight seemed to have said something before leaving, but I couldn’t make out the words. After I had been struck by that damned thunderbolt, it felt as if my eardrums had burst – I could hear no sound.

‘Reeeeeeeee!’

All I heard was an unpleasant ringing in my ears.

And it wasn’t just my ears; my entire body felt battered and bruised. My armor had already half-melted, the scorched metal pressing into my skin, and my hands kept shaking. Every time I took a breath, it felt as if my throat was being torn out.

Nevertheless, I still couldn’t flee this battlefield.

It was madness to join up with my allies with the mark that floated above me. If I did, that terrible storm of lightning would fall upon Dotrin’s main base. I ground my teeth as I stared at the sky through the thick branches. Dark clouds were gathering once more.

The surface area that the clouds covered was too great for me to flee. When I saw another flickering flash, I readied my body.

‘Krakka!’

A lightning bolt struck above my head.

‘Kaarreull!’

The energy stored within me flashed through my body and into my hand, and I met the bolt.

‘Ssuuvak!’

As I summoned the mana from my mana heart, the bolt of light was driven away.

“Bleeurg!” However, because my mana had not been released, I ended up retching blood. I placed Twilight on the ground and knelt down as I vomited.

“Hfoo, Hfoo,” I stared at the sky as my breath came on short.

This was my true limit. If I was hit by lightning a couple more times, my body would not withstand it, no matter how well I channeled mana into offsetting the magical bolts.

I raised my body, no longer staring at the sky, and I sprang into a sprint.

After running on for a long time, dozens of lights were dancing over my head. Each one was a stigma to draw the magic of the wizards, as well as a more physical mark that announced my presence to everyone.

I extended my mana and knew that there were enemy forces in all four directions.

It was only then that I realized that I was being driven on by them, being encircled.

I didn’t understand it.

There is a great stretch of forest with many enemies, so why would they be mobilizing such a great number of troops to catch only me?

The enemy's magic poured in at me before I could even grasp the situation. A ball of flame rushed me, and I crushed an arrow of ice.

I dodged the fireball and kept running.

Once more, I felt a great energy gathering overhead.

And just before that energy formed itself and struck at me as lightning, the Imperial Army made their appearance.

The energy gathered above my head quickly dissipated into nothingness.

I would have been glad of it were there not hundreds of knights and dozens of wizards surrounding me. It was a very precarious situation.

"…!"

"…!"

Shouts in True Imperial rang out from all over the forest, yet my ears still rang, so I couldn't understand what the hell they were trying to say.

But there was no need to understand the words: Their intent was obvious.

They must have been giving voice to the stereotypical yells: "Catch him! You there, stand still!"

I fixed my sword and tried to gauge the might of the enemies surrounding me.

Seven paladins, two-hundred knights. Twenty wizards under heavy guard.

I gave a bark of laughter.

It was always nice if wolves surrounded the tiger that they always avoided, but the problem was that there were far too many wolves.

"Why are they so many?"

After saying this, I fixed my swords before me.

Dawn was approaching.

By now, the news would have reached Dotrin's main encampment. I hoped that they were able to prepare measures to stop the terrible enemy. If they could not field countermeasures, then the front defensive line would be rendered defenseless.

"Hfoo," I breathed out, blinking my eyes as I looked for a way out.

Then I noticed that one section of the encirclement was rather weak. Maybe they had deliberately left the gap so that they could corner the rat without it biting the cat. Or maybe the knights closing in one me had just done a bad job by leaving such a sloppy gap.

Either way, I had no choice in the matter.

"…!"

As I was formulating my plans for escape, two paladins and dozens of knights approached me.

"…!"

"What are you saying, man. I can not hear," I replied to the paladin, who drew his sword as he continued to shout. Then he rushed right at me, stabbing in with his blade.

I blocked, dodged, and struck out. He parried my attacks in turn, avoided a blow, and counterattacked.

After we had exchanged a few strikes, I quickly stabbed out into the paladin's shoulder. He reeled back, and my blade squelched out of the wound. He then hesitated.

'Klang!'

A sword blazing with an Aura Blade slashed in from the side, intervening in our duel, and I managed to block it.

Suddenly, all the paladins had me surrounded.

“Okay. So this is the empire’s way.”

I spat on the ground and then fixed my swords, gripping them tight. I started reciting a poem in my head that could help me overcome my current predicament. If worst came to worst, I would escape this situation by singing the [Poem of the Dragon Slayer], which once slew Gwangryong. But that was the last resort, and I would hold it in reserve for as long as possible.

I started softly reciting the [Golden Poem].

The energy that had leaked from me without my knowledge was recaptured into my body. My breathing calmed in an instant.

I held up Twilight and angled my body.

If I survive this, I’ll probably gain a new poem. The agony left my body, and my energy sprang to the fore. And then the thought suddenly came to me: I’m glad I’m alone.

It would have been a grim situation, a big deal, if Gunn, Adelia, and Bernardo had been here.

I was surprised by this thought, and then I realized: I had never thought such things until this day, even though I had battled across numerous battlefields.

Perhaps I had just been ignorant, or maybe I had been arrogant.

Today was the first time that I was thinking about my death, and the moment that I realized this, my body trembled – And someone spoke in my head.

It didn’t sound like the voice of the idiot, nor was it one of those messages that came from my true body on occasion.

Yet, it wasn’t a voice utterly unfamiliar to me.

That’s…

{Hey, you empty-headed fuck!}

# CHAPTER 145
# THE DAY WHEN THE SKY ROAD OPENS (4)

{For how long would you like to be a god?}

In a world in which my ears rang, I could hear only the voice in my head. There were many who spoke swear words in this world, but there was only one being I knew that could swear while doing so in an elegant, sibilant voice.

“Ann?”

{That’s fucking right. It’s been a while since someone called me by that nickname}

Her blunt reply dazzled my mind. She was a hero of the Great War, which ended hundreds of years ago – A knight who killed the giant king Eda as one of the Five Predecessors.

Master of the sword, she was Agnes Bavaria. I had never thought to hear Agnes’s voice again, and hearing it stunned me to my very core.

“Is that really you, Agnes?”

{Aye, I’m Agnes. First, stop wielding double swords. You look like a crossbreed dog without pedigree. If I had eyes, they would be rotting from my skull}

Agnes cares little for small talk.

“But how did you-”

{We can talk later. First deal with these hybrids, who are neither wizards nor knights}

I was snapped awake by her words. The paladins had surrounded me, and as Agnes said, now was not the time to enjoy the thrill of reunion.

“Don’t go anywhere.”

{I've been here for hundreds of years. What're you talking about?}

Only after I heard Agnes answer did I feel relieved. I tightened my grip upon my swords.

"…!"

"…!"

The paladins rushed at me and there followed a great flurry of swordsmanship.

Each one of their strikes was like a rock that threatened to batter down the floodgate, and I did not dare slacken my defense in fear of the water gushing in.

A roar pierced through my tinnitus. I blocked, parried, and blocked again like crazy.

I couldn't even think of counterattacking – I just blocked and dodged in desperation.

However, as it is impossible to block ten fists with one palm, so too is it impossible to block seven swords with two.

I was cut across my back, and a sword stabbed into my leg. A piece of flesh was torn from my waist, and my molten armor fell to the ground along with the fleshy lump.

My body was wracked by such terrible pain, yet I clenched my teeth as I thrust my swords out.

"…!"

I stabbed into a paladin's chest. He grabbed onto my sword, so I released it, swung my body around, and severed his hand.

'Aaargh!' screamed the paladin.

Just as I managed to retrieve my bloody sword, another blade flew in at me.

'Qlschaaup~' I was stabbed in my shoulder, and a subsequent slash cut into the back of my knee.

My legs trembled, and fell to one knee, stabbing Twilight into the ground as I held

onto it. From that position, I swung Dragon Slayer in a wide arc around me, clearing a space as a golden flash spread out in all directions, forcing the paladins to hurriedly step back.

'Fwoo~ Fwooo~'

{So you daft bastard, didn't I tell you not wield dual swords?} Agnes chided me.

Instead of answering, I caught my breath as I stuck my chin out.

As I leaned against Twilight, I glared around me. The eyes of the paladins flashed, and they were awaiting their chance. Things looked bad.

My sight was blurred, either due to being struck by lightning or as an effect of losing so much blood. I gritted my teeth and opened my eyes.

{Do you remember?}

Leaving Twilight in the ground, I staggered as I raised myself.

{When I was surrounded by giant legionaries.}

I took up Twilight and angled its blade. I pulled my true body back as if preparing for a piercing strike.

{… I thought it was truly over, then}

'Fwooo~ Fwooo~'

I exhaled as I stared at the paladins.

{If it weren't for you, in all likelihood, I would have died. I wouldn't even have left a corpse}

The paladins exchanged glances.

{So this time, It's my turn to aid you}

They began to approach me.

{Just as you led me… }

My chest swelled as I drew in a deep breath. The paladins rushed at me, almost simultaneously.

{… I will lead you}

Everything started to flow slowly at that moment.

{My only companion, my old companion} Agnes said to me {You and I are not separate. We are two – Yet one. What I have done, you have done. My feats are your feats}

{This is the fruit of the seeds you have sown, the seeds that have now grown}

{You are the glory that you attained through me}

That strange, resonant whisper of hers remained terrifying to the end, and then something majestic embraced me. My two limp arms felt rejuvenated. My mana, which I was struggling to call up, once more began to pulse violently.

{Run as wild as you want}

My hazy vision cleared up in an instant.

{I will watch your arse}

As I looked at the six swords so slowly drifting toward me, a soft poem came to my lips.

“When I cleanse my sword”

“Blood into a river flows”

“And the flesh enriches the earth”

[—]We sing [Poetry of Sudden Change][—]

‘Dgiii!’

And at that moment, a brilliant golden beam burst from the tip of my sword.

“Qwa Hahaha!” a cold-hearted war fanatic laughed happily in the midst of a roaring world. Hearing that laughter, I sliced my blade down as hard as I could.

A great pillar of light soared upward as if reaching for the sky and then plunged to the earth.

* * *

A pillar of light rose from the middle of the battlefield, a great sword that was tens of meters long. Facing such a terrible unreality, the imperial knights and wizards ceased all resistance.

They watched the sword of light tilted.

“Alas…”

Knights reach out to touch the light, enchanted by it.

That hallowed light ate their hands, dissolved them, yet there were no screams.

The knights looked on with vacant expressions as their hands disappeared.

The great sword of light hovered over the heads of the imperial troops and plunged down.

‘Schdee Guwdaaak!’

It was a roar that shook the earth upon its axis. Dust and dirt rose into the sky, swallowing the area.

‘Fwshoooo~’

A wind picked up, blowing away the dust, and the horror, the carnage, was revealed.

Flattened lumps of iron were scattered all over. Blood, hair, and flesh were tangled up into the squashed heaps of metal.

These were the bodies of knights, crushed in their own armor, and among these

lumps were the remains of the paladins as well. The paladins that the empire so boasted of.

Yet, the corpses of the paladins had fared far worse than those of the others, for they had been closer to the center of the sword.

'Dump,' two paladins, who had been lucky enough to avoid a direct hit, sank down on their asses. There was no pride on their faces, nothing that showed that they were knights who had reached completion.

"Uhuuugh…"

They groaned like terrified beasts, kicking at the ground with their feet like mewling babes.

Their behavior was that of men with troubled minds, and they behaved shamefully. Yet, there were none to point at them and call their actions ugly. Those that could were dead and those that lived were not truly alive.

The gathered knights of the empire saw the man who had caused so terrible a disaster, and they dropped their swords. The man was kneeling on a single knee on the ground, and he was gasping for breath. Yet, his position did not seem precarious. Rather, the sight of him was somehow breathtaking, and the energies flowing around him were enough to overwhelm anyone who dared approach.

The imperial troops did not even consider charging at the man – Some started retreating back into the forest. The man staggered to his feet and seemed to snap awake. He then gripped both his swords and aimed them at the Imperial Army.

Half of their number had died, becoming lumps of misshapen flesh, yet half still remained. They still had some power to them, those remaining knights and wizards.

Nevertheless, the imperials were confused by the man's gestures, and they stepped back.

The man stared at them for a moment and then spat to the ground. Then he started walking, limping, his swords hanging in his grasp.

'Rattle, ching~ Rattle, ching~'

Whenever the man stepped over the corpses of those crushed in their own armor, there rang a nauseating noise as his boots strode upon the lumps of flesh and iron.

'KIEEEEEE!'

The swords the man carried scratched against the ground as they keened with an eerie sound.

'Duf!' Some of the weaker-willed wizards could not withstand the terrible energy of that noise, and they fainted.

'Jooch,' the man stopped and wiped the blood that ran from his forehead.

"Waagh," the man groaned, staggered, and then took a step back. When he walked once more, his steps kept veering to one side – In the direction of the surviving imperial knights.

Nobody moved.

The man, who seemed so exhausted, passed by the noses of the knights. He had a bloody, exposed back, yet not one of the knights dared pick up their swords.

They couldn't even breathe as they watched the man pass by in front of them.

The man passed the ranks of knights, and in front of him was the great forest. He looked back.

In a way, he seemed to appreciate the horror that he had wrought, and in some ways, he also seemed conflicted, as if wanting to kill the remaining imperial knights.

It was then that the thought entered the minds of the empire's knights: Don't let him leave here alive. If he is to be killed, our chance is now, this moment.

It was the two surviving paladins who moved first.

They were terrified, but their desperation was greater. They wielded their swords with trembling hands, staggered, and then began running at the man.

"For the emperor! Kill!"

As the paladins screamed this, the knights grabbed their swords and started to approach the man one by one. The man remained unmoving. He just stood there, with his back to the forest.

His eyes shined eerily, and his face was darkly shaded.

The knights who approached him halted in their tracks.

“Look! He can’t lift a finger now!”

“Don’t be fooled – It might be a bluff!”

The paladins struck, and the knights once more began approaching the man. Finally, the knights who neared him struck out with their blades.

And they found out – The man’s gaze was not directed at them.

The man was looking at the sky.

‘Rummbbbll,’ dark clouds suddenly covered the sky. The knights froze where they stood.

They had witnessed the thunderbolts strike their enemies several times throughout the night, and they had been grateful that they had not been the target.

But now, the terrible magic that had decimated the enemy ranks was about to smite down upon their heads.

“Stop! Allies in the area!” terrified imperials shouted. However, the manifester of the magic remained unseen, always hidden.

They shouted in all directions and cried out that the magic be stopped.

Theirs was a pointless waste of breath.

Even the moment that they had let go of their bellows, the magic had been forming up to strike.

‘Brrggkkk~’ light flashed through the dark clouds, and dozens of thunderbolts crawled through the air like snakes of light. Terrified knights scattered in every

direction, yet they all already knew – Their human legs were too slow, and the magical storm covered a great area.

And in the midst of that chaos, the man hadn't blinked once. He raised his swords and pointed them at the sky. His energy seemed to cut into the striking bolts of lighting.

'Kurruungg!' the dark clouds roared, and once more, dozens of flashing blue snakes flickered their tongues in the dark clouds beyond.

Just then, a sharp cry came from somewhere.

'Keeeaaahaaa!'

Not one, but dozens of such roars echoed through the forest.

A hundred thunderous snakes appeared from the other side of the sky.

'Kyaaahahh!' the wyverns roared and flew in, towards the central mass of dark clouds that seemed as if it would let loose its thunderstorm at any moment.

At the forefront of the flyers was an abnormally large wyvern.

"Lances!" came a grand roar from the rider of the great wyvern.

The wyvern riders readied their long lances.

"Pierce it!" the rider roared once more, and dozens of wyverns became shining beacons that pierced through the blackened sky, and the sky was sundered.

The dark clouds were scattered, with dozens of great holes pierced into it by magic lance.

And through those dozens of holes, the sun cast its great beams.

The place where the Knights of the Sky had passed through had become the heavens of Dotrin once more, with the sun shining brightly upon the forest.

The road to the sky had been opened.

# CHAPTER 146
# CATACLYSM (1)

After the white-burning light disappeared, all that remained was a dull-colored stone that could no longer be called a jewel.

'Krr~ Krr~'

Cracks soon appeared, and then, the stone fragmented.

The old man looked at his wand and stubbornly pressed his hand against the broken shards of the jewel. Then, he vomited blood.

The old man clutched his chest as he leaned on his cane, his breaths coming out harsh.

"Master!" the wizards who were watching him cried, rushing to his aid.

The old man raised his hand and waved them away.

"Huwoo, Huwoo," the old man breathed like that for some time, his shoulders hunched as he leaned on his cane, and then he suddenly sighed.

"I'm sorry. It's really tragic."

Perhaps he regretted that one of the artifacts of the Mythic Age, rare even in Towers, had become obsolete. Or perhaps his regret lay in the fact that he had not achieved his purpose, despite utilizing all the magic at his command. The old man's lamentations were vague.

The wizards dared not guess the meaning of his words; for all they saw was an old man with a haggard and ashen face.

It was only as they looked at his face that they realized it: The old man's gaze was neither directed at the ruined artifact nor in the direction of his intended target in the forest. The old man was gazing farther afield.

Somewhere to the west – In the direction of the territories ruled over by the Burgundy imperial dynasty.

“Now the knights will face that which I have witnessed for the emperor, and it is only a matter of time until his existence is revealed.”

These were very strange words for the wizards to hear. The old man had come into war by order of the emperor, and his mission was to get rid of Dotrin’s knights.

Wasn’t this the reason for him ruining the magical artifact?

However, the old man seemed more concerned that the emperor hears the news of the battlefield than about anything else. Some of the wizards grew tired of the mystery.

“Well, I wonder why master has so recklessly manifested your magic,” one wizard spoke up, giving voice to his uncertainty, and as he realized what he had just said, he flung his hand over his mouth.

The old man did not berate this wizard, nor did he answer his question.

“I have to go back.”

“Master, if you return in the current situation we find ourselves in, even under the direct order of the emperor, we might face grave peril in the future,” one of the wizards voiced his concern.

“I tried to break that man and his novel energies, yet I failed, for I had reached the extent of my powers. If I say this, the emperor cannot fault me,” came the old man’s embarrassed reply, and he seemed rather casual about the entire affair.

However, a fear-filled light now shone upon the faces of the wizards.

Theirs was a true fear of someone, so different from what they had felt when the old man had attempted his cataclysm. The old man despaired when he saw the faces of his disciples, saying, “I am truly worried about it. I will let the emperor know in advance that we have destroyed Dotrin’s outpost, and with the great damage we have caused, the emperor has no just grounds upon which to punish us.”

As they heard the old man’s words, the wizards stated that they dared not speak

freely anymore. They would just follow his will. The old man stopped talking then as he sent his mind into the area of the forest where it had been before. His face hardened like stone, yet he did not move, as if nailed in place.

It wasn't just the emperor that worried him. Still, there was one final thing to be done.

The Wyvern Knights had arrived on the battlefield only late in the game, slaughtering imperial knights and wizards from the sky.

'Groow~' the ferocious wyvern growled as if it was being suppressed by some unknown force. The Wyvern Knights looked at the sky, and their faces paled. It was the hour after dawn, and the dark clouds have been scattered, the sky cleared. Yet now, a darkness was encroaching upon the entire world.

"Look! There!"

Some of the Wyvern Knights pointed to the sun. A great dark blotch was encroaching upon it.

And the greater this dark stain stretched, the darker the world became.

It was different from the storm clouds they had faced, much more sudden and far more sinister.

Before long, the blackness completely engulfed the sun.

Night fell upon all the world.

* * *

The Leonbergian knights awaiting the return of the first prince with the Wyvern Knights stiffened in sudden surprise. The sun had been shining up until now, yet sudden darkness came upon the world, so much so that they couldn't even see a few steps ahead.

"Aahh?" the mute half-elf groaned like a terrified beast.

'Blach,' the maid, awaiting only the return of her master, clutched her chest and fainted.

Blue lights blazed into the eyes of the three men who had accepted the spirits of the ancient paladins.

“Finally.”

“The time is right.”

“It has arrived.”

Bernardo of the Eli family screamed as the three men spoke such unknowable words.

“What!? I’m fucking anxious over here! Why are you guys acting like this?”

Bernardo’s eyes were filled with fear of the unknown.

* * *

“Light the fires! All rangers and knights, arm yourselves and ascend the walls!”

The Count of Winter Castle shouted hoarse orders, his fortress surrounded by darkness.

“Call back all the rangers out scouting!”

Upon his command, rangers pulled out flares and fired them into the sky.

‘Buwooo Buwooo Buwooo!’

The sounding of the horn rang out without pause.

The Count of Winter Castle looked out over the walls.

Lights appeared all over the snowfield bordering the mountains. The rangers who have gone out scouting seemed to have lighted torches. The count watched the torchlights approach the castle, his anxiety great.

‘Kra-aa-ah!’

‘Creeeee!’

All manner of monsters came roaring, bounding after those lights. It was as if the entire mountain was roaring with great ferocity.

“What the hell?”

The count’s face became firm as he took in the ominous state of the darkened world, an unprecedented event in all the hundreds of years of history that Winter Castle has witnessed.

“Fuck this. I don’t even get a single day to enjoy a moment’s comfort,” cursed a Ranger Platoon leader as he looked at the sky, complaining all the while.

It was a sky where nothing was to be seen, a darkly portentous sky without sun or moon, an utterly horrifying sight.

“Just when I relax, something else has to happen! And this time, it’s surprising!” the ranger complained and then jumped in anger as he caught sight of one of his troops.

“Oi, you there! Get on your mark! Everyone keep apart.”

Next to him stood the tower-lord of the newly constructed Spire, and she was staring at the sky.

“Those who have left shall return once more, and their old glories and trails shall be resurrected.”

She had a strange voice as if it flowed from the deepest depths of a cavern.

“What? His Highness is returning?” came the ranger’s chiding question, for he had not clearly heard her words. But the wizard gave no answer. She just watched the night that had come upon the world.

“Huh?”

“It’s getting brighter!”

The night that had so swiftly came disappeared just as suddenly.

“I felt so cold. I thought day would never come again,” the ranger sighed in relief, still trembling in terror.

“To prepare for the unknown, search the castle to see if there is anything wrong. And for the time being, we shall keep an eye on the mountain pass, without conducting long-distance missions!”

The Count of Winter Castle ordered his soldiers to prepare for any unusual events that the future might bring.

“The dwarves have come!”

And in the meantime, the dwarves appeared.

While they migrated, they had postponed the mounting of the iron cannons due to their construction of the Spire. They have now returned to Winter Castle, bringing along their cannons for its walls.

And throughout their labors, they did not speak a single word. They just stared at the mountain with worried faces from time to time.

The sudden phenomenon has ended, yet the mountains still howled.

* * *

A dry laughter echoed through the hall, where only one being was present.

“It has begun, it has begun.”

The emperor, sitting upon his high throne, was smiling.

“In no way can he be a descendant of the Bavarian family. Their lineage is well documented.”

The emperor once more burst into laughter, finding it all to be so pleasant.

After he had laughed for a long time, he once more spoke in his dry voice.

“The road to heaven will open. The winged things shall come once more. The earth will rise and all the beasts that walk upon two legs or jump upon all fours shall make their return.”

His words were like a prophecy, and they were like a poem. The emperor sang his

prophetic poem time and time again – With a terribly dry voice.

And in the next moment, the emperor trembled with terrible energies.

However, the knights and attendants outside the hall were merely relieved by the fact that the phenomenon of night by day had ended without any harm coming to them.

* * *

The darkness lifted, and the sky regained its clarity. All was as before.

Yet, my heart was still beating wildly. Something has happened.

I didn't know what it was, but I knew that it wasn't auspicious.

{This is a day when the Myth of Gaecheon and the Myth of Sudden Change have reappeared at the same time. It cannot be a coincidence that this phenomenon has occurred}

Agnes thought along the same lines as I, saying that today's occurrence of sudden night was a clear sign of something.

Still, both of us were ignorant as to the portent of the event.

I tried to rid myself of my worries. If today's happenings were a sign of something, then its reality would soon be revealed.

No matter how great my anxieties, there was no use in clinging to a mystery that didn't provide an answer. Then, all of a sudden, Agnes said that we didn't have much time remaining for talk.

Her sudden communication with me was only possible because my true body had so ravenously consumed the thunderbolts which had filled it with energy.

"Why are you in there?" I asked the question that I was most curious about.

{I don't even know. However, my guess is that this curse comes to all who wield the same sword}

I was dazed by her response. According to Agnes, there could be so many other beings trapped in my true body. And she confirmed this – There were many beings within Dragon Slayer.

Agnes added that most of these entities have lost their egos over time and have become things that existed – Yet did not.

Like ghosts.

“Then, can you tell me who is in there besides you?”

{We are aware of each other, but we have never communicated. We can only confirm our mutual existence}

Just when I was about to ask more questions, Agnes spoke once more. {Our time is up}

Her voice then began to fade.

{I would have talked longer, if only we had the time}

She sighed and then quickly spoke once more.

{It was indeed a grand thing, to save your life. From now on, save yourself and don’t let it happen again. And keep in mind: Dual swords can never surpass the wielding of a single, proper sword}

She was just nagging me – This was how Agnes said goodbye.

“Can I meet you again?”

{You’re just like a child}

She gave a soft laugh, and so faint was the sound of it that I had to focus my mind to hear it.

{My old companion. Poor Gruhorn}, she called to me.

Her voice was filled with regret and compassion that I could not understand.

{Be devoted and steadfast to reach new heights. Then, only if you forget, can you recover Dragon Slayer}

Her voice turned into the faintest of whispers.

{Be happy}, she said softly.

{I will always watch over you}

That was it.

“Anne!? Anne!”

I called to her several times, yet no answer came.

I tightly shut my eyes, locking my conversation with her into my mind, lest I ever forgot her voice. As I ran through our conversation, I frowned.

Only if you forget can you recover Dragon Slayer.

Somehow, it was a strange thing for her to say: That I had to regain my status as an ancient sword. I felt uncomfortable.

As I thought on it, again and again, I identified where my sense of incongruity arose from.

“Well.”

And all of a sudden, my head started to hurt greatly, as if it was breaking open.

I clenched my teeth, yet I could not prevent a groan from escaping my lips.

“Hold on, Ian! Just a little! Wizards are ready to heal you at camp!”

The urgent voice of the Wyvern Knight pierced into my mind.

I was trying to tell him that I was okay, but my eyes rolled in their sockets, and my consciousness became blurred. I couldn’t even feel the regular, rocking movement of the wyvern.

It felt as if I was floating on the clouds.

“You must not fall asleep!”

“Focus your… mind…”

The voice of the Wyvern Knight started fragmenting, breaking up in my mind.

“I’m here… Mind… Please? Bill… Eat…”

Even that faded, and then – I could hear no more.

# CHAPTER 147
# CATACLYSM (2)

Even if some time had passed after the immediate crisis, Berg Berten's mind remained troubled. Because of this, he walked through the camp, trying to calm his heart.

'Bawooo!'

After he had walked for a while, he heard the sound of a horn.

"The Knights of the Sky are back!" a soldier yelled.

Berg reflexively looked into the western sky. A single wyvern was flying toward the camp.

A hundred had set out, so why does this one return alone?

The old noble's heart pounded, and his terrible imagination ran wild through his head.

"Huh? But why is he alone?"

"Surely…"

As Berg watched the wyvern, he heard the frantic gossiping of the soldiers.

The sight grew more ominous by the moment, yet Berg managed to remain patient as he conducted a closer study of the wyvern. The beast was beating its wings as if in a hurry.

Berg measured the angle at which the wyvern was descending and started running.

'Fwoop Fwoop!'

The wyvern passed over his head. The fishy smell unique to wyverns slammed into

Berg's nostrils, yet there was also the tangy smell of blood and scorched flesh.

Berg gritted his teeth and picked up his pace even more.

The wyvern headed for a spot some distance off, and it almost crash-landed to the earth.

"Wizard! Where is the wizard with the healing magic!"

A screaming voice followed the landing. As Berg passed the barracks, he saw that a crowd had already gathered around the scene.

"What? Why did he return alone?"

"What body?"

From the noise of the crowd, the word 'corpse' settled into Berg's ears.

"Let me pass! Make way!"

Berg proceeded brusquely through the massed soldiers and knights.

Beyond the edge of the crowd was the wyvern. It was breathing loudly, and its back was red, for the saddle was drenched in blood. Its yellow scales were covered in coagulated blood which had flowed down from the saddle.

Berg Berten frowned, and his eyes felt stiffened by the sight of the bloody wyvern. Instead of looking for even a moment more, he turned his head.

And he could finally see the wyvern rider, and the bloody thing kneeling by his feet looked like a man. Berg approached this wounded man, and to see him up close made his wounds appear even more disastrous. The pieces of iron armor still clinging to him had melted, and his leather armor was stuck to the skin. The flesh not covered in armor was a dismal sight, with the man's flesh full of cuts. Yellow pus flowed from the skin that had been blistered by the heat. Of the dozens of sword cuts on the man, many were deep.

The man's helmet was gone, and only then did Berg realize that this was his first time seeing the man's face. The mercenary had always worn his helmet and hood. He was much younger than Berg had initially believed him to be.

No, it wasn't enough to say that he was young – Was he maybe eighteen or nineteen?

"Alas."

Looking at that young face, a face that had not yet left behind its boyish qualities, Berg groaned. Scabs of blood clung to the man's chin, nose, and mouth after it had flowed across his face and solidified. His skin was bleached, as pale as a blank sheet of paper.

This was the typical appearance of knights who had fought so hard that they suffered mana reflux.

Berg could imagine it without having been there – How hard this man struggled in the forest.

"Stand aside!" came the urgent shout as someone pushed Berg out of the way.

It was a wizard of the military who went to kneel before the bloody mercenary and poured out a flash of healing magic.

The blisters upon the man weren't so swollen anymore, yet the magic was not enough. Another wizard appeared and added his light. The cuts upon the man's body gradually knit shut, faded. The skin, which had looked ripe and pale, regained some of its original complexion.

Nevertheless, the man's wounds remained serious.

Then, the overall commander appeared, as well as the young vice-commander of the Knights of the Sky.

"Give your report," said the vice-commander, and his stubborn voice made the Wyvern Knight stand on attention.

"After we had crushed the enemy's large-scale magic, all us Wyvern Knights descended at one and neutralized the enemy's magical capabilities. I believe that the battle is still ongoing, but our position in the battle was overwhelmingly dominant when I left."

The soldiers and knights gathered in the crowd broke out into joyous shouts.

The news that the Sky Knights were overpowering the enemy was enough to revive their hopes for the deteriorating military situation, for, up until now, they had only been seeing their allies stumbling into the camp through the night, defeated.

“They are truly the Knights of the Sky!” the commander laughed in great joy.

Even in the midst of everyone’s rejoicing, Berg Berten’s face remained firm.

His gaze was settled on the members of the Veil Mercenary Company as they forced their way through the crowd.

The men and woman stared blankly at their drooping commander and went to kneel in front of him.

“…!” the young man shouted something with a distorted face, yet none here could understand the unfamiliar language of these people. However, they all grasped the meaning of the shout.

The celebratory atmosphere ended as if icy water had been poured over it. Cheers were no longer heard.

“Move him inside,” ordered the vice-commander of the Sky Knights. The wizards, sweating, nodded.

Soldiers approached the man, loaded him onto a stretcher, and carried him off to some barrack. The members of the Veil Mercenary Company followed them.

Berg Berten stared blankly at the scene.

* * *

The Knights of the Sky returned after their engagement with the enemy. Twenty-one imperial wizards, two hundred ninety-four knights, and two paladins: This was the reported kill-tally of the Sky Knights. The atmosphere might have briefly become subdued, but now all the soldiers celebrated the overwhelming victory, praising the deployment of Dotrin’s secret weapon.

However, the Sky Nights weren’t content with the outcome at all.

“When we arrived, the enemy was in a poor state. They were terrified and could not

even form lines to resist us. Even the proud paladins of the empire were the same. All we had to do was pierce our lances through the chests of men who couldn't even hold swords properly."

People thought that the knights were humble.

They even thought that the Sky Knights said such things to elevate the efforts of the soldiers and knights of the outpost who had been slaughtered throughout the night.

Yet, this wasn't so: A surprising tale came from the mouths of the Sky Knights. Theirs was a story of the incredible kill-tally achieved by a single mercenary commander.

Three hundred knights, twenty or so wizards, and five paladins: This was the number of enemies slain by the mercenary before the Sky Knights had reached the battle.

The Wyvern Knights went on to say that they were only able to inflict their own great carnage due to the considerable losses the enemy had suffered under the overwhelming assault of the mercenary.

They emphasized that it was he who had contributed the most to the battle and that he had made the greatest effort to save his fleeing allies.

Of course, people didn't believe it. It didn't make any sense.

Even a passing dog would not believe the story that a single mercenary, not even a knight, had achieved a kill tally greater than that of so many Sky Knights.

But there were also believers: They were the survivors of the outpost who have been saved by the mercenary commander.

"We lived because he stopped a terrible lightning bolt."

"He cut through thunder with his sword."

They testified as to the great efforts of the mercenary commander. They visited his barracks every day, saying that they wished for him to regain his consciousness as soon as possible.

The Veil Mercenaries stayed in the barracks of their commander day and night.

* * *

When Doris arrived before the barracks of the Veil Mercenaries, there came a great noise from inside. There was a deep rumbling sound, yells, and the screams of a young woman, and all these sounds flowed over one another.

Doris hurriedly opened the door, entered, and halted where he stood.

Men with bruised faces were grappling a woman, holding onto her limbs.

“Damn! Hold her!”

The woman was frenzied as she struggled with the men. Each time she tried to escape their grasp, one of the men was wildly shaken about.

“What’s this then?” demanded Doris, and the men looked away from the woman for a split-second.

‘Pak! Pchuk!’ in that gap, the woman managed to rip her arms from their grasp and punched into the heads of two of the men. Then she jumped away from them.

Doris only now saw the eerie glow in her eyes.

“Dammit! Catch her! Hold onto her so she doesn’t run out!”

The men squealed in terror as they ran to recapture the woman. However, before they could reach her, she grabbed a sword that stood in the corner of the barracks.

The men halted in their tracks.

The woman stared at them, her eyes flashing in many colors.

“I told you to get rid of the swords, didn’t I?”

“I put them all away. That’s His Highness’s sword.”

The woman took a step forward, and the men took a step back.

Doris stared at the woman, and after having seen the reaction of the knights, he instinctively put his hand to the hilt of his sword, as if in the presence of a wild beast.

“Never pull a blade! If you draw a blade, it becomes a big deal!” one of the men shouted.

But it was too late: Doris had already half-drawn his sword.

Light began to pour from the eyes of the woman as she saw the glint of steel.

Her intentions were murderous.

Doris frowned. He did not know the details of the matter, but it was clear that the woman was not sane. His first priority now was to subdue her, and he didn’t know whether this was possible.

She hadn’t even noticed him before, yet the moment that his blade left its scabbard, the energy that had awakened in her was enormous. Doris swallowed the spit in his dry throat as he faced the great, bestial energies flowing from her.

The woman stepped forward.

‘Duk!’ a dull sound was heard all of a sudden, and the woman stopped. In front of her stood a cloaked half-elf who had appeared like a ghost. The woman curled up as she brought her hands to her stomach. And in the next moment, the men rushed forward, grabbed her, and pressed her down.

The woman, subdued and breathless, began to sob in sorrow.

“Why do you keep holding me? I’m just here for His Highness…”

The woman was so utterly sad, and Doris began to wonder whether the men had been bothering her.

However, that eerie light still flowed strongly from her eyes. And when Doris studied the scene, he saw that only the men had bruised faces. It was clear that the woman wasn’t the one who had been assaulted.

She now sobbed so much that she couldn’t come to breathe, and she fainted.

The men let go of her in relief.

“Woo! It gets worse and worse. I will get too exhausted to stop her before His

Highness wakes up, mark my words."

"We might all die before his eyes open."

The men were wildly breathing as they lamented the situation.

Meanwhile, the half-elf had picked up the sword dropped by the woman and tied it to her waist. She then mercilessly bound the woman with a length of rope, as if she was a rebel or a criminal.

"What the hell is all this about?" Doris asked with a blank face as he took in the scene.

"We had to calm down the cute, caring girl who wants to claim vengeance for her master."

"If she was twice as cute, we'd all be dead by now."

"We're lucky that she is as she is, then?" demanded the man as he wiped the sweat from his forehead.

"I've come to see if there is an improvement," stated Doris.

"It is exactly as it looks like. His flow of mana remains irregular and there have been no signs of consciousness," came the man's frank reply.

Wizards had channeled their healing magics over several days, but all that was healed were the wounds of the flesh. The prince remained unconscious, showing no signs of waking.

This was already the fourth day.

Doris was looking at the prince with a stern face when the man said, "As soon as his condition improves, we will return him to Leonberg."

Doris frowned upon hearing the sudden declaration.

"If he has to die, if he has to bleed, it will not be in Dotrin but in the lands of Leonberg," said the man, ignoring Doris's expression, adding, "I think he has already paid the price for gaining Dotrin's favor and friendship many times over."

Many lives were saved, for the prince had remained in enemy territory on his own, attracting the attention of the enemy's archmage. He had saved thousands directly and indirectly.

He had long since paid his debt for Dotrin aiding him in his assassinations in the empire if one studied a list of the enemies he had defeated.

No, even before this, Doris had never held the intention of holding Leonberg's prince here by using such debts as an excuse. What concerned Doris at the moment was that the prince would be returning in such a damaged state.

"If you need my aid, then say so. The Knights of the Sky will help you to return."

Doris had no just grounds to prevent the prince's subordinates from taking their master back to their country.

"Thank you," was all the man said as he grew silent.

After that, Doris watched the prince for a while and then left the barracks of the Veil Mercenaries. The atmosphere of the military camp was not as dark as it had been after the setbacks of a few days ago.

This was by virtue of the fact that more troops had arrived from the outpost than had at first been expected, for it was initially surmised that half of their number had been wiped out.

The improved morale was also due to the kill tallies that the Knights of the Sky have steadily reported over the past few days.

The war entered a lull.

Once the Wyvern Knights came to occupy the airways and launched their occasional surprise attack, the Imperial Army dug itself deeper into the forest instead of marching out. The thick trees provided them with cover.

There was nothing much that the enemy could do if the Sky Knights launched their surprise attacks, but there was no need to overdo things.

The Knights of the Sky have already widened their operations beyond the forest, and they have already posted impressive kill tallies. In a state such as this, there was no

need to draw a great army, tens of thousands strong, from where it hid in the forest.

The troops of Dotrin were now watching and waiting, lest the enemy ever tried to pop out where they were not wanted.

“What the hell is the third princeps thinking?”

Doris shook his head as he thought about the princeps who had become overall commander of the Imperial Army.

# CHAPTER 148
# CATACLYSM (3)

It was the same situation in the Imperial Army: They did not understand the thoughts of the third princeps. The stupid princeps seemed very chuffed with his strategy of using the great trees and the forest canopy to prevent the wyverns from attacking his troops. He acted as if he wasn't concerned about other military matters.

The commanders of the Imperial Army believed that it was paramount to escape the forest as soon as possible in order to occupy Dotrin, which meant that they could not understand his rationale.

"Does his Highness understand that we are on a military expedition? If he takes his time like this, then the situation will not fall in our favor!"

"This war will only end if we advance, so what use is there in giving Dotrin time to strengthen their defenses?"

The commanders lamented the situation.

Rumors were even circulating that the third princeps did not want to advance out of the dense forest in fear that Dotrin's wyverns would target him.

They said that the princeps believed that the knights and paladins were not enough to protect him. And all came to know that the leader of the wizards lay behind curtains in his tent after breaking some manner of seal.

And as such rumors spread, the soldiers' morale did not improve.

In the meantime, even uglier rumors were making the rounds.

Soldiers heard strange sounds in the woods, and one soldier who had stood guard even said that he saw a tree move. More came to say that they had encountered a strange being that was neither man nor beast.

Such ghost stories were likely to spread in a forest of giant trees, trees so great that

none could guess their age.

In fact, some scouts did see a strange beast that had been terribly wounded, and they also chanced upon a human body that had been drained of all its blood.

The main problem the soldiers now faced mentally wasn't their exhaustion – It was the insubstantial rumors of phantoms which spread through the army like a plague, breeding only fear.

The soldiers now became too fear-filled even to conduct their scouting patrols, and they tried everything they could not to stand guard at night.

And on this day, things were the same – Soldiers were trying hard to somehow excuse themselves from the scouting mission, but the commander became greatly annoyed and forced them to leave the main corps and conduct their reconnaissance.

"Oh man, it feels like someone is watching us."

These soldiers now walked through the forest, the canopy so thick that not a ray of sunlight was to be seen, and they were fed up.

"You don't really believe it, right? It's all rumors, right?" asked a small-statured soldier in a trembling voice. The epically-proportioned soldier next to him rebuked him harshly.

"Our main corps alone has fifty thousand men, and two thousand of us scout today! No matter if such things exist, they won't come out. And if they do, they will all die by our hand."

"Right? Then why are you looking around so shiftily?" asked the little soldier.

"You boys are terrified! At least one of us have to do a proper job," said the large soldier as he strode on through the forest.

He sighted a bizarre tree and came to a halt.

"Oh! It looks like it has a human face. I think this is what must have scared the cubs that came scouting before us," the soldier said as he tapped against the face in the tree, which looked like that of a crying man.

“Hey! Hey! Don’t do that! This feels bad for some reason,” the small soldier cried out, but the more the small one moaned, the harder did the large one tap the face.

“Man, it’s just a tree. What’s so scary about a tree?”

The large soldier then pulled his knife and scraped across the face in the tree, waiting.

“Do you see? Nothing happened. So stop being scar-” the soldier had been talking with zest but now shut his mouth. He felt something touch his shoulder.

His eyes widened in terror as he saw something in the periphery of his vision.

“Haah bastard!” he shouted as he swiveled back, tripped over a branch, and fell flat on his ass. He saw a drooping branch that swayed in the wind, and this had bumped against his shoulder. The soldiers around him laughed and laughed at his expense.

“You cubs, I just tripped over and fell,” he grumbled in excuse as he lifted himself from the forest floor, facing his comrades with the tree to his back.

All of a sudden, he saw his fellow scouts look at him with hardened faces.

“Behind you-“

“You won’t fool me again, you little cubs! I know who the cowards are here.”

“No, it’s not like that! Behind you!”

The large soldier just laughed. His laugher was cut short as he grew stiff, a strange chill running down his spine. His neck creaked back as he turned his head.

The giant tree had been but a few feet from him moments ago. It now almost touched his nose.

“Why is this he-“

‘Fuwuchook~’ before he could finish speaking, a strange noise came to his ears. He blankly looked down at his chest and saw that a branch had pierced right through it.

“Huh?”

The soldier softly moaned as he looked up at the tree. The face of bark that had been crying was now laughing, its mouth stretched wide.

'Kwarqq~ Kwarqq~ Kwarqq~' dozens of branches pierced into the soldier's body, and his feet were lifted from the ground.

Even though his body had multiple pierce wounds, not a drop of blood fell upon the ground.

'Glchulp~ Glchulp~'

The branches that had penetrated his body were now ravenously sucking his body dry of blood.

All the soldiers of the scout team screamed and started to flee from the tree, yet they could not escape. Giant trees had been sparse in this spot of the forest a mere while ago, yet such trees had now surrounded the soldiers, forming a dense laager. They were trapped. Escape was impossible.

The roots of the trees slithered like giant snakes as they grabbed onto the ankles of the soldiers. Branches skewered the men's bodies.

"This is a dream! Right? It's a dream… Heheheha!" the small soldier sat down, laughing. A tree branch reached out to him and pierced through his throat.

The man continued to laugh as if he couldn't feel the pain. His laughter started drying up, became flat, and was then heard no more.

'Glchulp~ Glchulp~'

The only sound that echoed through the forest was that of the ancient, giant trees slaking their thirst.

Similar scenes were playing out all over the forest.

One scouting squad rushed into camp, saying that trees attacked them. Most had been sucked into the darkness of the shady forest, never to be seen. The survivors of one squad stumbled into camp, shouting that some of them had been killed by a beast that had popped up out of nowhere.

Many squads have been sent into the forest, yet only twelve survivors stumbled into the camp.

“Sir, there are monsters in the forest!”

A survivor was beset by terror as he informed his leaders of the situation.

The commander shouted at the soldier, rebuking him for his madness. Still, knights were dispatched so that the situation could be grasped in more rational terms.

The knights returned, and their once-courageous faces had become as pale as blank paper.

One of the knights drew something from a sack. It was a dry branch, as could be found anywhere in the forest – Except for the fact that this branch was wriggling, moving.

“These things are everywhere,” the knight stated in a firm voice.

The commanding nobles went to the third princeps and made their report.

“The forest has changed, your Highness. The entire forest seems to be attacking our soldiers. There are monsters everywhere.”

The third princeps dismissed the existence of such monsters, his face visibly paling. He said that the situation would be made clear once the wizards and knights were mobilized. So, he ordered one knight squadron and three wizards to be sent out.

“The night is long, your Highness. It would be wiser to add some common troops and wait until the day shines bright before we send anyone out.”

It would not be an easy task for the knights and wizards to make their way through the deep forest at night. The commanders objected to his orders, yet the third princeps didn’t listen.

“It is a full moon. The knights will be able to rely on the moonlight to complete their mission,” said the princeps. He then made sure that the knights and wizards were driven into the forest, telling them that it would not be so dark under a full moon.

The terrified wizards and knights left the main corps and were swallowed into the

dark forest.

‘Hwoooo~ Haawooo~ Hawooo~’

The third princeps heard a wolf howling in the distance, and the sound of it was many times eerier than the howl of any normal wolf. The knights and wizards returned from their reconnaissance just before dawn.

A hundred and three men had set out, yet those that returned were of a greatly reduced number. Thirty knights had returned, while not a single wizard made it back. The surviving knights had scratch marks all over them, and chunks of their flesh have been gouged out. All in all, they were in poor condition.

“Sir, we were attacked!”

“What the hell did it!?” bellowed the commander.

“Sir, they were neither human nor wolf – Strange things…” came the knight’s response.

One of the wizards who had remained in the camp interrupted, asking, “When these monsters were sliced by swords, did their wounds heal swiftly?”

“Yes! I definitely cut into one of their chests, even saw its ribs. After a while, there wasn’t even a scar left on its body.”

As the wizard heard the knight’s words, he spat on the ground.

The commander asked the wizard if he knew anything of the nature of their foe.

“I am uncertain, yet, just the other day, I had paged through an old tome and chanced upon tales that discussed beasts such as these.”

“In an old book?”

“It is a rare text that has by some fortune been preserved into our current age. In it are transcribed myths and legends, traditional tales. The tome itself is four-hundred years old.”

“I don’t visit places to read valuable old books, so just tell us what you know,”

insisted the commander.

All of a sudden, the wizard asked if any of the commanders had anything cast in silver. One of the nobles unclasped a silver brooch from his coat and handed it to the wizard.

The wizard stepped in front of the wounded knight and stabbed into the man's forearm with the spear of the brooch. It was a mere pinprick, far lesser than the grievous wounds that the man had already suffered. And besides, a man like a knight could tolerate such insignificant pain. It was a pain 3333th of a battle wound.

"Aaaahh!" the knight gave voice to a blood-curdling scream, unable to bear the pain that the pinprick caused.

"Hah! Is it any wonder that our knights fall to Dotrin's mischief if they can't even suffer such small wounds?" the third princeps chided as he clucked his tongue.

The knight's face became distorted, so great was his pain.

Neither the knights nor the commanders gave any credence to the third princeps' words because 'Fwooshu~' the knight's forearm suddenly caught flame out of nowhere.

Startled knights ran to their comrade, trying to extinguish the fire, but the wizard shouted in a pointed voice, "Leave it alone! That thing is no longer human!"

After hearing the insulting remarks of the third princeps, the knights could no longer hold their anger after the wizard spoke.

"A knight who has failed his mission is no longer a man!?" bellowed one knight.

"How can you be so cold-blooded when you see an ally of yours struggling in pain?" another knight demanded of the wizard.

Instead of responding to the protesting knights, the wizard turned to face the third princeps and told him, "The ancient tome spoke of a terrible plague that spreads only under the full moon. Those that suffer from this ailment ignite when silver touches their bodies."

The third princeps became greatly terrified when he heard the word 'plague.'

“An epidemic!?” he cried. “What!? What kind of disease is it?”

“This disease is called the full moon fever, your Highness,” the wizard informed him.

The knight who had been bellowing in pain suddenly grew deathly silent.

‘Grreahh~’ instead of screaming, he gave a low, ugly growl, like that of an animal.

“In other words, your Highness, it is also called the curse of lycanthropy.”

The knight’s body began twisting, morphing terribly when the wizard finished speaking, and his human form began distorting.

Then he quickly became something that was neither man nor wolf – Yet both.

He had once been the comrade of the now terrified knights. His erstwhile comrades now pointed their swords at something that has become a monster.

But before the knights could bring their swords to bear upon the abomination, before the once-knight could morph into his new, strange shape – He died.

He was twisted and crunched back and forth, trapped in his own armor, which broke his bones and snapped his spine.

That was the beginning.

‘Graaahoor!’ in the next moment, the knights who had returned from the mission, the survivors, changed one after the other. Most of them were still in their heavy suits of armor, so their bodies contorted, they vomited blood, and they died.

“Notice that most of them die without being able to overcome the curse. But sometimes, if luck is on their side, they can overcome it.”

In the midst of that terrible scene, the wizard spoke on, somehow sounding excited instead of being repulsed by the awful reality of the changing men.

The wizard raised a finger and pointed at one of the morphing knights.

‘Tuduk~’ the hard leather straps that buckled the man’s iron armor were torn apart by his magic, and the armor clanged to the ground. Before long, a monster that had

none of the qualities of the man it used to be gave voice to a protracted howl.

'Hawoooowooo!'

It was both a beast and a man, yet not fully man nor beast.

"And that's how they become half-men," said the wizard, and the third princeps screamed.

"All! Kill it now! Kill!" the princeps cried.

A paladin stepped forward and momentarily beheaded the monster.

Everyone grew sick as they watched the monster's body spasming, wriggling for a while after its head had been cleanly severed from its neck.

"What, what… It's not a big deal," the third princeps managed to say, trembling all the while.

The princeps' bluff did not last long – 'Hawooooo hoowooo!'

As if in answer to the howl of the half-man who had died mere moments before, the howling of wolves was heard – Through all of the woods, from every direction.

It sounded as if the entire forest was howling.

The knights gripped the hilts of their swords and stared in every direction. The third princeps hid behind the paladins, trembling with fear.

The wizard looked at them. He had been about to recite the final verse of the ancient tome, but he now held his tongue.

The demons of the full moon are the warriors who serve the Plague Lord. If you find them: Beware of their king.

The wizard knew all too well that if he so much as spoke the name of the Plague Lord now, the third princeps would force all the knights and wizards to hunt the king and then bring the head to him.

And after what happened to the other wizards who had been forced into the forest…

No, the probability of survival was low.

The wizard kept his mouth tightly shut. He did not want to die because of the stupid princeps.

* * *

One of the knights returning from reconnaissance reported that turmoil had broken out where the Imperial Army's main corps was encamped.

Dotrin's leaders discussed this report.

Some speculated that there was infighting between the principes, for they did not stand in solidarity. Others theorized that some of the empire's exhausted soldiers have tried to desert camp. Then there were those who said that some of Dotrin's soldiers and knights yet survived and were locked in battle with imperial forces.

Whatever the case might be, it was clear that something was going on in the forest. An impatient commander proposed a massive surprise attack, and the other commanders seriously pondered his suggestion.

Yet, they could not reach a definite decision.

Just as much as the Imperial Army was in the dark over matters, so too did those of Dotrin have no clear knowledge of what was occurring.

It was the Sky Knights who first noticed the abnormal events.

The wyverns were flying over the forest. Suddenly, the beasts plunged to the earth and landed on the ground at once. The wyverns folded their wings back and hunched down.

No matter how much the Sky Knights tried to goad their mounts back into the air, the beasts refused to fly as they stared at the sky. Then, 'Kyaak! Kyaak!', they gave sharp cries.

They seem threatened, as if fearful of taking to the air. Their postures showed that they were ready to fight at any moment.

The Wyvern Knights had been trying to soothe their mounts and identify the source

of their terror, when – 'Aah Aah Aah Aah Aah!' something gave voice to a great, long cry.

The sound was far too clear to be called a roar, too strong to be called anything else.

The Wyvern Knights cast their eyes to the sky, their faces hard, and then a giant creature flew over their heads. The beast's elongated head was lifted proudly, and its jutting chin was as elegant as that of a gentile lady.

Its beautiful body was covered in bright scales that glittered like tens of thousands of embedded rubies. So gorgeous was it that it seemed to be not of this world. The film of its wings was more elegant than the sails of giant battleships, elaborately embroidered by masters.

It was like the king of the entire world.

It was a giant fire dragon.

# CHAPTER 149
# CATACLYSM (4)

‘Foo foo~’

A faint sound came from somewhere. As I listened to it, the sound was hazy, yet it grew more audible, little by little.

‘Fwoop! Fwoop!’

It was the sound of something flapping its great wings.

The way in which the wings flapped sounded very laid back yet so infinitely arrogant.

‘Aaaaahaahhhhhhhhhh!’

And in the next moment, I heard a clear cry ring out.

I opened my eyes.

I was looking at the ceiling of a barracks tent, which was shaking violently in the wind.

My eyes were now fully open. I could hear nothing – no ominous cries nor the arrogant flapping of wings.

‘Dudum~ Dudum~ Dudum~’

Nevertheless, my heart still beat like crazy.

“Ha, your Highness?” I heard a deeply concerned voice, and two blurry figures suddenly came into view. As I focused my eyes, the blurry world became a bit clearer.

Adelia, greatly upset, was looking down at me. Her gentle, honest eyes quickly became wet with tears.

“At last…”

Next to her was a face filled with an ambiguous expression, neither smiling nor crying – the face of Gunn. I looked at them quietly and then jumped up from where I lay.

My head was spinning. I closed and opened my eyes and forced myself to shake off the dizziness. I could feel that my body didn’t move so well as I left the bed. My heart still beat like crazy, and the sound of beating wings still lingered in my ears.

I endured the giddiness and headed for the flap of the tent. I lifted the thick fabric and took a step outside, looking up at the sky.

“Ah.”

There was nothing – not even a cloud in the clear, blue sky. I didn’t see anything that should make my heart thump maddeningly in my chest. Only then did I release the breath that I had been holding in. My legs buckled as I failed to grip the tent flap, and I staggered.

“Your Highness!”

The startled women rushed to me, preventing me from falling.

“Is this a dream?”

I was relieved, yet at the same time, disappointed. Then I became amazed.

What did I imagine to see that would make me feel both relief and regret?

As I thought about this, Adelia and Gunn helped me back into my bed.

“A few days have passed?” I asked.

“Ten days have passed since your Highness fainted. I didn’t know whether your Highness would wake up,” came Adelia’s reply, and she struggled to talk as she swallowed down her sobs. But soon, tears began to stream down her face. I raised my hand and tried to wipe off Adelia’s tears, but my arm was limp, listless, and I could not muster the energy.

Adelia grabbed my shaking hand and placed it back onto my chest, holding onto it. Gunn tapped her finger against the back of my hand, and when I turned to face her, I saw that she was touching her lips.

(Are You Okay)

“I lack strength, but I’ll get better once I eat some food and rest well.”

Only as I said this did Gunn smile brightly.

“But what about Bernardo and the others?” I asked.

Adelia wiped away tears with her other hand before replying.

“While your Highness was asleep, there was a great uproar! Bernardo Eli is busy trying to find out what the cause of it is.”

Adelia’s voice was rather hilarious, sounding like a child boasting of some great saga. I smiled and remained quiet as I waited for her to tell me more.

“Oh, by God, a dragon! Your Highness should have seen it!”

The smile on my lips quickly stiffened, went away.

“What?”

Adelia’s face became terrified as she heard the tone of my voice.

“Well, your Highness. Just, all of a sudden…”

“Say it again, Adelia.”

I didn’t know how my face looked like, yet my tone of voice was fierce indeed. But I could not afford to comfort Adelia.

“A dragon appeared?”

The instant that the word ‘dragon’ had left her lips, my heart had started thudding in my chest again.

“Well, your Highness… What I mean is that the dragon appeared. People say that it’s a Hwaryong… I thought that something great would happen, but it just passed over.”

Adelia gossiped on, her face seeming as if it would burst into tears at any time. The only word that truly stuck in my mind was ‘Hwaryong.’

I thought that I had been dreaming, but this was reality.

Dragons had disappeared from the world hundreds of years ago – now they were back.

And this wasn’t just a dragon, but the most powerful of their kind: A fire dragon, a Hwaryong.

Gunn touched her lips and gestured.

(Calm Down. Now Time For Absolute Peace)

But my heart could no longer be calmed, having a will of its own.

‘Kwaduk!’

I clutched at my chest, my heart hurting as if it was being torn. Agnes might have taken the burden my soul should have born upon herself, but she wasn’t able to bear the agonies that befell my body.

It was I who had to use my own mana and strength to channel a [Mythic] poem.

And as a result, my mana heart has been emptied. I didn’t even have a handful of mana, and I had to leave it that way for now.

In a single moment, I had unleashed more mana than I could handle, and my mana heart had grown hard once more. And the heart, which should be absolutely calm, was now wildly swaying and absorbing energy at random.

Would it be this painful were I to swallow a handful of scorching sand grains after being thirsty for many nights?

Would it be this painful were I to swallow a blade after starving for then days, unable to overcome my hunger?

I had to deal with a type of pain completely different than that of the flesh.

Still, somehow, I endured through the pain and becalmed my beating heart.

It was not easy to calm my heart that thumped so crazily, but I was at least able to stop it from gathering more energy.

Still, I was wracked by terrible agony.

“Woah,” I groaned, gritting my teeth as I endured the pain. If I went on like this, my heart would shatter, so I released as much energy gathered in it as I was able to.

Instead of feeling better, a terrible feeling of weakness pressed down upon me.

I endured, endured, and finally fainted once more.

* * *

When I woke up again, many people were looking down at me with anxious faces: Prince Doris, Berg Berten and his old knights, and the members of my party.

I asked how much I had slept.

“Half a day has passed. It’s night now.”

Fortunately, not much time had passed.

“Can you help me up?”

My knights supported me. When I was halfway up, Adelia swiftly shifted a pillow in behind my back. The pillow wasn’t very fluffy, but it was still comfortable to lay back upon.

“Hfoo, Hfoo,” after I lay back and breathed for a while, I asked, “What about the war?”

“We beat them back a few times, and the front is currently in a lull.”

Doris gave a brief report of everything that had occurred while I was out: Of all the enormous battles the Wyvern Knights had conducted and their subsequent surprise operations.

He also told of the chaos that had come upon the imperial forces that hid among the giant trees.

"…so, we there we were, about to fly on to completely destroy their supply depot – and then he appeared!"

The tales that Doris told continued for a long time, and he naturally started to speak about Hwaryong.

"It was terrible. In all honesty, I had figured that our Knights of the Sky would be able to deal with dragons. I really believed that – until I saw him. How arrogant and stupid I was.

Doris seemed sickened by the thought of it, yet he laughed cheerfully and said that now that the descendant of the Dragon Slayer had woken up, there was no more need to worry.

However, despite his cheerful tone, I could see the fear lurking in the depths of his eyes. Even if he pretended to be right, Doris could not hide the horror engraved upon his heart.

It was natural.

It would have been stranger if his spirit had been intact after seeing that great dragon.

When I said nothing, Doris continued his obsessive talk.

Even if he so praised the greatness of the Leonberger family, I did not honestly believe that I could win if I were to face such a monster.

As I listened to the prince chatter away, I smiled bitterly, remaining silent. Hwaryong was a monster far different than Gwangryong, the dragon which had become the lyrics of [Poetry of the True Dragon].

The most powerful dragon among the mighty dragons, the oldest being in the world – Hwaryong is the king of dragons.

I wagered that even if the entire expedition that had ascended Mount Seori had come back alive and gathered in one place, there would be no way that they could do

anything against Hwaryong.

It was more of a conviction than a guess, for there have already been many failures.

Giant generals and their elite legionaries.

Warlords and berserkers of the race of greenskins.

Meisters and the iron cannons of the dwarven race.

High Elves and guardians of the faeries.

And none of those who challenged Hwaryong can be said to have been less mighty than Leonberg's founder and his knights.

They all failed, and they failed terribly.

The fire dragon was a true monster, and such a monster had returned to this world.

Among all such misfortunes, there yet existed a single fortuitous fact: Hwaryong was an extremely arrogant being who was not very interested in the affairs of the world.

All dragons were like that, yet Hwaryong was more severe in his indifference. He even looked down upon those dragons that looked down upon lesser beings in turn.

So- He was alone, he had nothing to with anything. Hwaryong just existed.

As long as he wasn't attacked, he wouldn't be the first to strike.

I subtracted all the more esoteric elements from the knowledge I had gained when I had been a sword and then appropriately explained Hwaryong's nature to the others.

"I'm glad. Honestly, I never wanted to fight him," said Doris in great relief. Then, it seemed as if he remembered something, asking, "If dragons are such indifferent things, it doesn't matter. But why did the Leonbergers struggle so much to go and kill the dragon in the north?"

"Why would Gwangryong be called Gwangryong? He was given that name because he truly was a mad dragon, a Gwangryong. He was far too human to be called a dragon. Gwangryong was even interested in creating his own kingdom."

“Indeed! So that’s the reason he was called the mad dragon.”

It was obvious from the name of Gwangryong that he had been a mad dragon, but Doris was somehow surprised as if having heard a most astonishing story.

He was a prince that constantly surprised me.

Doris asked no more questions about dragons, now fixing me with a deep look.

“As a member of the Dotrin royal family and as a knight of Dotrin, I thank you for your dedication and sacrifice to our cause. Thank you so much! You have my gratitude. Through your efforts, many of our troops survived.”

Doris bowed his head to me as he politely expressed his gratitude. I replied by saying that I had only been repaying my debt, so he didn’t have to bother.

He still thanked me several times, saying that he would forever be in my debt.

If left things as they were, forcing Doris out of my tent, for otherwise, I would have been thanked all day long.

When the prince was gone, Berg Berten faltered before he spoke.

“I have heard all the stories from his Highness, Prince Doris. I heard that you are, in fact, the first prince of Leonberg, not a mercenary. I will apologize if I have erred in any way.”

“There was no rudeness, yet now, I am a mercenary. I just do what I have to do,” I said.

“Is that so?” replied Berg, then added in a cold tone, without hesitation, “I always thought that smirk of yours wasn’t that of a sellsword.”

“Shall I act as a mercenary in a foreign country, or as a prince who is mocked by an old man?”

Berg had been laughing but quickly shut his mouth.

“Well,” he muttered. The old man had held no hesitation when I had asked him to treat me like a mercenary, but he now suddenly hesitated and became anxious.

“Hey! My true title and our contract are separate things, Berg. So, don’t even think about skimping on that payoff you promised me.”

“I am Berg Berten! In my entire life, I have never broken my word.”

“Put your money where your mouth is, or are you all talk? Just like a dog that can’t shit.”

“I have said my piece, so I shall leave.”

“That’s all you have to say?”

It took only a moment for the old knights to strike their fists against their chests in a salute. Berg Berten, amazed, bowed his head to me.

“I’m sorry,” said he, “I will sincerely apologize if you felt pressured by what I said. This old man made a false statement without knowing the facts.”

I bowed my head to express my gratitude, and the old noble bowed his head in apology.

Then, I began laughing.

After my knights have driven them all out, it became Bernardo Eli’s turn to bother me.

“Why did you do it! This is not our kingdom, so why did you risk your life? Do you seek death?”

Bernardo spoke of the battle as if he had been there himself. His lips flapped so much, and he frowned so greatly that, after a while, I wanted to ask him if his facial muscles have begun to hurt. In one half of his tirade, he nagged me about walking to my death while fighting wars for other countries and the other half consisted of him saying we had to return to the kingdom because he was fed up with this place.

I made sure Bernardo was also kicked out from my tent, telling him I would think about what he said once I was well.

Gwain, Trindall, and Kampra, their faces as discontent as that of Bernardo’s, disappeared in silence, just glancing at me. No goodbye flowed from their lips.

“Even if they look so cross, Sirs Gwain, Trindall, and Kampra also came to the barracks every day to check on your Highness’s condition.

“They must have come to check if I’ve died yet.”

“No way.”

“Adelia, Adelia. The world is not a flower garden, as you might think. I know it – they know it. Adelia, only you don’t know it.”

Normally, she would have heard me speak and grown silent right away, but Adelia defended the trio of knights to the end.

A finger tapped the back of my hand.

(While You Sleep. Maniac. Idiot. Rope Bound Her)

As I saw that, I laughed until my wits deserted me.

There seemed to have been a fight due to Adelia’s traits. It seems that she had inflicted minor injuries to the other knights while I had been out for the count.

I was able to grasp the situation quickly.

“Adelia was very heartbroken. She cares so much if things like these happen,” said I, and Adelia avoided my gaze with an awkward face. Behind her, Gunn beckoned (Not Fight. More Like Battle. Not Trivial)

Sign language wasn’t enough, so Gunn croaked, “Never faint again.”

Gunn seemed to have suffered quite a bit, for she seldom expressed her emotions, yet she now had a look of irritation on her face.

I just laughed, but I couldn’t truly laugh from the bottom of my heart.

Why has Hwaryong, who disappeared after the Great War, appeared at a time such as now?

Was this also some special omen?

While thinking about it over and over again, I remembered something. So obsessed was I with Hwaryong that I had forgotten all about the total solar eclipse, which was a somewhat strange and sinister phenomenon.

Then a voice spoke up in my mind.

{It's not just the fire dragon}

It was the voice of Agnes, who had told me to be happy last time we spoke, saying her goodbyes in such a grand manner.

"Ann?"

When I called to her with joy and a tinge of doubt, she coughed. Somehow, I could feel the meek look she gave me.

{We can only speak briefly} said she in a voice firmer than ever before.

{The world has changed. And it is changing violently even at this moment}

A change that I had failed to notice when my mana became exhausted.

{No, this is greater than mere change}

Agnes's dry voice broke into my mind.

{It seems as if you have returned to the past}

She said that everything happening now was similar to the events of the Great War.

But there was one difference.

{Now, the rulers of the world are humans}

It was only the dominant species in the world that has changed.

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